Leading for Alignment: Integrating Internal Marketing and DEI for High-performance in MNEs

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Abstract In the complex environment of multinational enterprises (MNEs), organisational performance increasingly depends on the strategic integration of internal marketing and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). This paper aims to examine how strategic leadership serves as the primary mechanism for aligning these two domains to drive high performance. The research method employs a multi-phase qualitative synthesis, combining a systematic literature review (SLR) with a narrative thematic analysis of peer-reviewed research across 2001–2026. The methodology utilised search strings across major academic databases (including Scopus and Web of Science) to identify studies at the intersection of Strategic Leadership, Internal Marketing, and DEI. Studies were filtered based on their relevance to the MNE context and their focus on longitudinal performance outcomes. The gathered data were then mapped onto a cross-theoretical framework, integrating the Service-Profit Chain, Dynamic Capabilities, and Institutional Theories, to identify recurring leadership behaviours and systemic patterns that facilitate cross-functional alignment. The results evidence that specific leadership behaviours and systemic strategies are essential for achieving high-performance alignment: i) Leadership Styles: Transformational and servant leadership are found to be most effective in fostering a supportive culture that promotes both employee engagement and inclusive workplace dynamics. ii) Systemic Integration: Effective alignment requires moving beyond symbolic gestures to institutionalise values through transparent communication, equitable reward systems, and the integration of DEI into performance metrics. iii) The Mid-Level Bridge: A critical finding is the translational role of mid-level managers, who are responsible for adapting global strategic mandates to local cultural and institutional realities. iv) Theoretical Grounding: The research bridges the Service-Profit Chain with Dynamic Capabilities and Institutional Theories to explain how leadership adaptability drives a dual competitive advantage, securing high-value talent retention while navigating complex, diverse global markets. The findings provide a roadmap for MNE practitioners to move from "performative" commitments to a unified strategy in which leadership intent, organisational systems, and employee experience are fully aligned, thereby helping them contribute to UN Sustainable Development Goals 8 and 10.

Keywords: Strategic leadership, Internal marketing, Diversity, Equity, and inclusion (DEI), Employee engagement, Multinational enterprises (MNEs)

1. Introduction

The present global business environment is defined by escalating volatility, institutional complexity, and changing workforce expectations (Ferraro, Hemsley, and Sands, 2023). To achieve sustained competitive advantage, multinational enterprises (MNEs) can no longer rely solely on market-facing strategies. Instead, organisational performance increasingly depends on the internal alignment of corporate values, employee experience, and operational execution (Ramesh et al., 2023).

Two fields have emerged as critical drivers of this internal environment: Internal Marketing (IM) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). Internal marketing treats employees as internal customers and jobs as internal products, aligning individual motivations with organisational goals to enhance customer-centric service delivery (Ahmed and Rafiq, 2002). Concurrently, DEI frameworks focus on creating equitable systems that cultivate belonging, representation, and psychological safety within diverse workforces, requiring integrative approaches that rethink diversity strategies to combat systemic inequality (DiTomaso, 2024). Despite their complementary goals, internal marketing and DEI are frequently managed in corporate silos. Internal marketing is often isolated within corporate communications, while DEI is relegated to compliance or standalone human resource groups. This fragmentation leads to organisational friction, employee cynicism, and "performative compliance," in which public commitments to inclusion, such as those visible in recruitment materials (Alahakoon et al., 2024), fail to translate into actual employee experiences. Strategic leadership is the essential mechanism for bridging these domains, as it entails the ability to visualise, adapt, and drive strategic change across an entire organisation while balancing short-term stability and long-term viability (Ashkevari and Ghasemi, 2023). In an MNE context, this leadership requirement is uniquely complex because strategies must transcend cultural, geographic, and institutional boundaries (Vallone, Elia and Greve, 2023).

This paper examines how strategic leadership explicitly integrates internal marketing orientation with DEI initiatives to drive systemic, high-performance alignment in MNEs. By synthesising recent academic insights, we address critical research gaps by clarifying how leadership can bridge the silos between Internal Marketing and DEI, what specific frameworks move organisations from performative compliance to genuine institutionalisation, and how middle managers translate global strategy into local practice. In doing so, this study makes a distinct theoretical contribution by explicitly bridging the often-siloed domains of internal marketing and DEI. It proposes a novel cross-theoretical framework, synthesising the Service-Profit Chain, Dynamic Capabilities, and Institutional Theories, to articulate not only why this alignment is necessary, but how it can be operationalised through strategic leadership. Crucially, it extends existing leadership models by conceptualising the 'Mid-Level Bridge,' identifying the translational role of middle managers as the critical mechanism for converting global strategy into local, authentic practice. Ultimately, this synthesis provides a clear, actionable model for practitioners and scholars to move beyond performative actions towards the systemic institutionalisation of DEI.

2. Theoretical Foundations

To map the integration of internal marketing and DEI under strategic leadership, this study draws upon a cross-theoretical matrix built upon three foundational lenses: the Service-Profit Chain, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and Institutional Theory.

2.1 The Service-profit Chain

The Service-Profit Chain posits a direct, linear relationship between internal service quality, employee satisfaction, employee productivity, external service value, and ultimately, customer satisfaction and profitability (Heskett et al., 1994). Internal marketing operationalises this chain through mechanisms such as robust internal training and open communication, with recent studies confirming that targeted training is directly correlated with higher employee engagement and diversity awareness (Tudu and Singh, 2025). However, in modern global enterprises, "internal service quality" cannot be defined solely by technical tools or standard financial incentives; it must incorporate the psychological and structural conditions of equity and inclusion (Ramesh et al., 2023). When strategic leaders embed DEI into the internal marketing framework, they enhance internal service quality by guaranteeing that all employees, regardless of demographic or geographic background, experience psychological safety, fairness, and structural support. This holistic internal quality, often fostered through servant leadership approaches that prioritise employee empowerment and well-being (Eva et al., 2019), drives heightened affective commitment, which is the primary driver of service excellence and long-term talent retention.

2.2 Dynamic Capabilities Theory

Dynamic Capabilities Theory explains how firms maintain a competitive edge by continuously sensing opportunities, seizing those opportunities, and transforming or reconfiguring their resource configurations to adapt to changing external environments (Teece, 2014). In this study, the strategic integration of IM and DEI is conceptualised as a high-order dynamic capability. A diverse workforce provides an MNE with a wide array of cognitive perspectives and localised insights. However, workforce diversity alone does not yield a competitive advantage without internal marketing systems that actively engage, recognise, and mobilise this talent. Strategic leadership acts as the orchestrator that reconfigures corporate structures to support managerial ambidexterity, that is, the ability to balance standardised global efficiencies with localised, inclusive human resource adaptations (Ramesh et al., 2023). This adaptability allows MNEs to secure high-value global talent and rapidly pivot in complex international markets.

2.3 Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory asserts that organisations are profoundly shaped by their regulatory, normative, and cognitive-cultural environments, forcing them to align with external expectations to secure social legitimacy. MNEs operate across highly diverse institutional landscapes, frequently experiencing institutional distance and conflicting pressures between home-country standards and host-country realities (Beugelsdijk et al., 2018; Vallone, Elia and Greve, 2023). Many firms attempt to resolve these tensions through superficial, symbolic adoptions of popular values like DEI. Institutional Theory reveals that true strategic alignment requires moving beyond performative metrics to deep institutionalisation. Strategic leaders must navigate these institutional variations, leveraging localised managerial networks to translate global strategic mandates into legitimate, culturally congruent local practices without compromising core organisational values.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a multi-phase qualitative synthesis, combining a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology with a narrative thematic analysis to evaluate literature spanning 2001-2026. The review protocol was adapted from established methodologies for mapping intellectual territories and extracting systemic insights in management science.

Sample selection and search protocol. The search was conducted using Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases. The keywords related to the topic (title, abstract, and keywords) were defined as follows: ("multin*" OR "MNE*" OR "MNC*") AND ("strategic* leader*" OR "transformational leader*" OR "servant leader*") AND ("internal marketing" OR "internal market orientation" OR "employee engagement") AND ("DEI" OR "diversity" OR "equity" OR "inclusion" OR "gender" OR "cultural distance"). Furthermore, the search was also limited to i) Article or Early Access or Review Articles, ii) English language, and iii) until 1st of April 2026 (the date on which the database was extracted), resulting in 47 articles published from 1980 to early 2026, that were analyzed by thematic relevance, methodological rigour, and citation trends and are all included in this paper's references.

4. Results and Analysis

The qualitative synthesis revealed that the successful integration of internal marketing and DEI under strategic leadership relies on four core themes: specialised leadership behaviours, structural institutionalisation, the translational capability of middle management, and explicit mapping back to global sustainability frameworks.

4.1 Leadership Styles Fostering Alignment

The literature highlights that the choice of leadership behaviour directly dictates the psychological contract and subsequent employee commitment levels. Two primary leadership models emerged as highly effective in driving high-performance alignment: i) Transformational Leadership: Transformational leaders align an enterprise by articulating a compelling, inclusive organisational vision that transcends regional and cultural silos (Bass, 1990). By utilising individualised consideration and intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders reshape employees' cognitive perceptions, framing diversity as an essential strategic resource rather than a compliance mandate (Akbari et al., 2017). This style minimises the negative friction associated with age-based or cultural faultlines within international teams, converting potential interpersonal conflict into shared productive energy and collaborative innovation (Kunze and Bruch, 2010). However, the efficacy of any leadership style is contingent on how it is perceived, and research highlights a critical gap in this area: male leaders often believe their practices are significantly more inclusive than their female employees perceive them to be (Ng and Bates, 2026). ii) Servant Leadership: Servant leadership complements transformational vision by explicitly prioritising the psychological well-being, professional development, and systemic empowerment of the workforce. As a systematic review by Eva et al. (2019) confirms, servant leaders operate through a mutual value exchange, viewing employees as internal customers whose holistic needs must be fulfilled. This orientation fosters deep trust, open vertical communication, and a heightened sense of belonging. The data demonstrates that combining transformational inspiration with servant empowerment yields the highest levels of affective commitment, providing the baseline organisational environment necessary for internal alignment.

4.2 Systemic Strategy and Institutionalisation

The research indicates that leadership intent is insufficient if it is not structured. MNEs frequently struggle with performative commitments where top executives announce DEI targets, but the internal marketing mechanisms continue to reward traditional, identical behavioural patterns. This lack of systemic integration fosters significant perception gaps, evidenced by findings that male leaders consistently overestimate the inclusivity of their own leadership when compared to the experiences of their female colleagues (Ng and Bates, 2026).

Moving beyond symbolic actions requires systematic institutionalisation. Indeed, evidence suggests that systemic interventions such as structured workplace training are crucial mechanisms for embedding DEI, as they foster both employee engagement and genuine diversity awareness (Tudu and Singh, 2025). This requires a focus on core operational pillars, including: i) Transparent Communication Systems: Internal marketing relies on accurate generation and dissemination of internal intelligence regarding employee needs and grievances. Strategic leaders must institute multidirectional, transparent communication channels that allow diverse employee cohorts to speak up to higher-ups without fear of career risk or social sanctions, a practice heavily influenced by supervisor behaviour (Detert and Treviño, 2010). ii) Equitable Reward and Recognition Architecture: Grounded in Equity Theory, employees evaluate organisational fairness by comparing their inputs against received outputs. Strategic leaders must ensure that both financial incentives and non-financial rewards

(such as career development opportunities, public validation, and international assignments) are transparently distributed and structurally insulated from homophily or implicit cultural biases, which is a core component of global talent management (McDonnell et al., 2010). iii) Integration of DEI into Performance Metrics: To achieve genuine alignment, DEI metrics must be removed from isolated human resource scorecards and integrated directly into the key core performance indicators (KPIs) of all business units. When strategic leadership ties management compensation and progression to inclusive team outcomes and equitable talent development, internal marketing orientation shifts from a theoretical framework to an operational reality (Ashkevari and Ghasemi, 2023).

4.3 The Translational Role of mid-level Management

A critical finding of this synthesis identifies mid-level managers as the essential "Mid-Level Bridge" in multinational structures. While executive leadership outlines global strategic mandates, these strategies must navigate localised regulatory frameworks, labour laws, and deep-seated cultural nuances. Mid-level managers act as the primary conduits who absorb global strategic intent and recontextualise it to local realities, particularly in foreign subsidiaries (Chung and Dahms, 2021). To operate this model effectively, mid-level managers must possess high cultural intelligence (CQ) and cognitive flexibility. Cultural intelligence acts as the vital psychological toolkit that allows these leaders to switch behavioural repertoire across borders. For instance, a global internal marketing campaign focused on radical employee empowerment may encounter resistance or subverted execution in localised subsidiaries characterised by high power distance. In such scenarios, the mid-level bridge leverages high CQ to adapt the execution style, utilising localised communication styles or pacing strategies to maintain the underlying strategic intent of equity and engagement, without creating institutional friction or alienation.

4.4 Contribution to United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Finally, the strategic alignment of internal marketing and DEI is explicitly linked to global sustainable development frameworks, specifically contributing to UN Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities). By treating the global workforce as valued internal customers and dismantling systemic barriers to career advancement, strategic leadership moves beyond basic corporate social responsibility. The research confirms that MNEs with explicit commitments to female representation in senior leadership positions demonstrate significantly higher overall sustainability performance scores (García-Sánchez et al., 2023; Saeed, Riaz and Baloch, 2023). Aligning corporate systems with SDGs 8 and 10 builds firm legitimacy on the global stage, mitigates risks associated with social schisms, and generates a sustainable, high-performance workforce ecosystem.

5. Discussion: Theoretical Implications and Critical Reflections

The integrated framework developed in this study (Figure 1) moves beyond a mere description of leadership practices to offer a dynamic, cross-theoretical model of strategic alignment. By synthesising the Service-Profit Chain, Dynamic Capabilities, and Institutional Theories, our analysis yields critical implications that challenge conventional thinking in MNE management.

First, our findings reconceptualise the alignment of internal marketing and DEI not as a matter of operational synergy, but as a high-order dynamic capability. The persistent fragmentation of these functions within MNEs can thus be seen as a fundamental structural flaw, rather than a simple inefficiency. While the literature acknowledges the separate importance of internal marketing and DEI, our framework argues that their siloed existence actively perpetuates the 'performative compliance' that so many firms struggle to overcome. This implies that genuine alignment is not achievable through incremental adjustments. It requires a radical rethinking of organisational design, demanding the integration of performance metrics and the formation of cross-functional teams in a way that is often antithetical to the rigid structures of many MNEs.

Second, the framework exposes the 'Mid-Level Bridge' as a critical organisational paradox. While we identify middle managers as the essential conduits for translating global strategy into local practice, their role is inherently fraught with tension. These managers are caught in a 'double bind', as they are squeezed between the pressure of global standardisation from headquarters and the need for culturally sensitive local adaptation. Our synthesis suggests that their success or failure represents the most critical inflexion point in the institutionalisation of DEI. Therefore, the practical implication for strategic leaders is profound, as it is not enough to purely 'empower' these managers. MNEs must create robust systems of psychological safety and provide specialised training in cultural intelligence to equip them to navigate these conflicting institutional pressures effectively challenge largely unaddressed in current leadership models.

Finally, this study challenges the notion that leadership styles like 'transformational' or 'servant' are universally sufficient. Our findings indicate that the effectiveness of any leadership style is severely moderated by systemic factors and perceptual gaps. A leader may articulate a transformational vision, but if the reward systems still favour consistent behaviours, or if female employees perceive the leader's actions as less inclusive than their male counterparts do (Ng and Bates, 2026), the leadership effort fails. True strategic alignment, therefore, is less about a leader's personal style and more about their ability to build an entire organisational system, from KPIs to communication channels, that ensures their inclusive intent manifests as a tangible and equitably perceived employee experience.

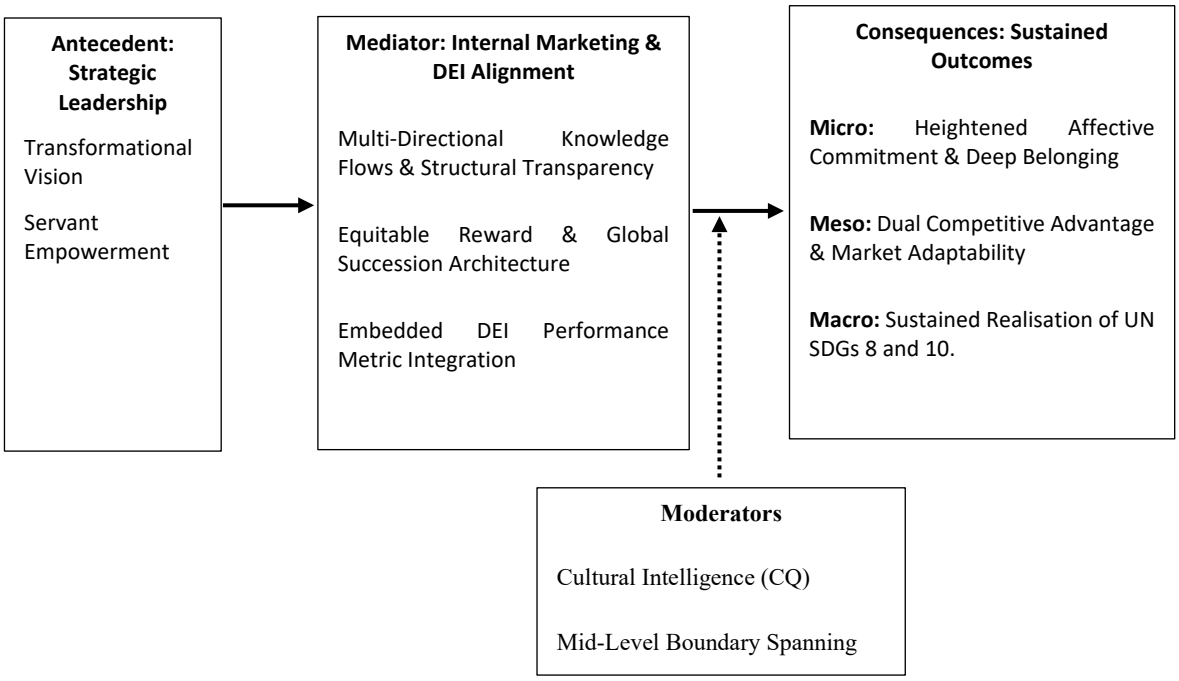


Figure 1: Integrated Framework Bridging Strategic Leadership, DEI Internal Marketing, and Sustainable Macro Outcomes via Cultural Intelligence

6. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

This study began by addressing the persistent gap between strategic intent and lived experience in the context of DEI. Through a multi-phase qualitative synthesis, we argued that the successful integration of internal marketing and DEI is the defining feature of contemporary strategic leadership in MNEs. Our primary contribution is a new, integrated framework that posits this alignment not as a static outcome, but as a dynamic capability. We have demonstrated how this capability is initiated by strategic leadership, operationalised through systemic mechanisms, and ultimately arbitrated by the effectiveness of middle managers acting as a 'Mid-Level Bridge'.

However, the conclusions of this study must be examined in light of its limitations. As a qualitative synthesis of existing literature, our findings are contingent on the scope and quality of the reviewed papers. A more robust research agenda should therefore be pursued to build upon this foundational work. Future research should focus on empirically validating the proposed framework, ideally through a mixed-methods approach that combines large-scale quantitative surveys with in-depth qualitative case studies to test the hypothesised relationships while uncovering the nuanced mechanisms at play. Attention should be given to the 'Mid-Level Bridge'; future studies could explore the psychological strains and role conflicts experienced by these managers and quantify how different facets of their cultural intelligence moderate the success of DEI initiatives. Furthermore, to address the potential Western-centric bias in the available literature, comparative studies are needed to examine the framework's dynamics across MNEs from different institutional contexts (e.g., Global North vs. Global South) and industries. Finally, longitudinal research would be invaluable for tracking the evolution of this alignment as a dynamic capability over time, moving beyond static analysis to observe how these integrated strategies are developed, embedded, and sustained.

Ultimately, this paper provides a cross-theoretical roadmap for MNEs to move beyond performative compliance towards a state in which leadership intent, organisational systems, and employee experience are fully and authentically aligned. By doing so, organisations can unlock a dual competitive advantage: securing and retaining high-value global talent while building a truly equitable and high-performing workforce, thus contributing meaningfully to global sustainability goals.

Ethics Declaration The authors declare that ethical clearance was not required for this research, as this study relied exclusively on the secondary qualitative analysis and synthesis of peer-reviewed academic literature. No human participants were directly engaged, and no proprietary or confidential organisational data was collected.

AI Declaration The authors confirm that an advanced AI tool (Gemini 3 Flash) was utilised during the creation of this paper, specifically to synthesise findings into structured sections based on the target abstract specifications. All analytical insights, conceptual framework modelling, and final editing were rigorously executed and verified by the authors to ensure conceptual precision and academic integrity.

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