



## Exploring Corporate Value Internalization Among Leaders in Multinational Organizations

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### ABSTRACT

Leadership communication plays a crucial role in shaping corporate culture, especially within the complex dynamics of multinational organizations. While existing studies have examined leadership behaviors and strategic communication, limited attention has been given to how leaders internalize and enact organizational values from a subjective standpoint. This study addresses that gap by exploring how leaders interpret, negotiate, and embody corporate values across diverse cultural contexts. An interpretative phenomenological approach was employed to investigate the experiences of senior leaders navigating value internalization within culturally diverse environments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight senior leaders from multinational corporations, and data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Five key themes emerged: communicative adaptation across cultures, the embodiment of values, authentic vulnerability, disruption of informal value transmission in hybrid work settings, and identity tensions when personal and corporate values diverge. These findings indicate that value internalization is a reflective and context-bound process influenced by emotional, cultural, and relational dynamics. The study highlights the importance of incorporating experiential learning, ethical reflexivity, and culturally responsive communication into leadership development practices. It contributes to a more nuanced understanding of leadership communication and offers directions for future cross-cultural and longitudinal research.



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## INTRODUCTION

Leadership communication in multinational organizations has become increasingly complex as global operations expand across diverse cultural, linguistic, and social boundaries. Amid such diversity, leaders are expected not only to make strategic decisions but also to act as key agents in cultivating and transmitting corporate values. These values serve as a cohesive force that aligns heterogeneous teams and reinforces organizational identity.

However, existing studies tend to emphasize leadership strategies, performance outcomes, or structural models, with limited attention to how leaders personally experience and internalize these values (Smith et al., 2021; Tan & Madsen, 2022). There remains a critical gap in understanding the subjective, emotional, and culturally situated experiences of leaders who enact these values across various contexts.

To address this gap, this study aims to explore how senior leaders in multinational organizations interpret and internalize corporate values in culturally diverse settings. Adopting a phenomenological lens, the research focuses on lived experiences to uncover the human, relational, and contextual dynamics that shape leadership communication.

Leadership communication functions not merely as a procedural task but as a medium through which meaning, ethics, and identity are negotiated. The process of value internalization is

influenced by personal belief systems, emotional labor, and cultural interpretations (Kwon et al., 2023; Ahmed & Lin, 2021). Leaders do not just convey messages—they embody and interpret corporate values in ways that reflect their own positionality and the socio-cultural landscapes in which they operate.

While early frameworks such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions (now considered less applicable to today's rapidly shifting cultural paradigms) provided foundational insights, recent scholarship emphasizes dynamic, intersectional, and relational approaches to cross-cultural leadership (Nguyen et al., 2020; Roberson, 2021). These newer studies highlight the importance of contextual sensitivity and ethical reflexivity in navigating value-laden communication.

This research, therefore, contributes to the growing body of work that frames leadership not as a static set of competencies, but as a lived, embodied, and context-bound phenomenon. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study seeks to generate insights that enrich leadership theory and practice, particularly in cross-cultural and ethically complex environments. Understanding how leaders experience and give meaning to corporate value internalization is therefore not only relevant but imperative. It opens pathways for a more humanistic, culturally attuned, and psychologically informed model of leadership one that aligns with the realities of modern organizational life. As leadership is fundamentally a lived phenomenon, shaped by and shaping the subjective world of individuals, phenomenology provides an apt methodological framework for its inquiry.

Building upon the broader importance of leadership communication in transmitting corporate values, research has increasingly turned toward understanding the lived experiences of leaders as they navigate this responsibility within complex cultural landscapes. The subjective dimension of such leadership processes how values are personally internalized, interpreted, and embodied has emerged as a vital area of inquiry, particularly within multinational organizational contexts where cultural nuances significantly shape communicative meaning.

However, efforts to explore these experiences have often been constrained by methodological limitations. Quantitative approaches, while useful in mapping correlations and outcomes, frequently fall short in capturing the richness and depth of human experience. Surveys and standardized metrics tend to reduce complex phenomena into variables, thereby overlooking the interpretive processes through which individuals assign meaning to their roles, values, and interactions. As a result, critical nuances such as emotional tensions, identity negotiations, and cultural dissonances experienced by leaders remain underexplored or entirely absent from the literature.

These methodological challenges underscore a broader issue: much of the existing research has failed to fully grasp the essence of how leaders internalize and communicate values within dynamic and culturally diverse environments. While frameworks on leadership styles and organizational culture provide important theoretical scaffolding, they often rely on predefined constructs that do not emerge organically from the lived world of practitioners. Consequently, the ability to access the internal, meaning-making processes of leaders particularly those operating across cultural boundaries requires a more experiential and interpretive methodology.

It is within this context that phenomenological inquiry becomes especially relevant. By prioritizing the subjective experiences of individuals and seeking to uncover the structures of consciousness that shape those experiences, phenomenology offers a powerful alternative to traditional methodologies. It invites deeper engagement with the meanings that leaders construct and enact through their daily practices, allowing researchers to move beyond surface-level descriptions toward a more authentic and contextually grounded understanding of leadership communication.

In current organizational practice, the challenge of value internalization is often addressed through standardized leadership frameworks, corporate communication strategies, and structured training programs. These approaches, while practical and widely implemented, primarily emphasize measurable behaviors, compliance metrics, and prescriptive messaging. They offer procedural guidance for embedding values but tend to overlook the intricate psychological, cultural, and

emotional processes through which leaders make sense of and live out those values in real-world, multicultural environments.

Such conventional methods are limited in their capacity to illuminate the inner experience of leadership. They are grounded in assumptions of uniformity and linearity, often neglecting the dynamic interplay between personal identity, cultural complexity, and ethical tension that leaders routinely face. As Müller (2020) notes, survey-based and behaviorist studies of leadership frequently underrepresent the subjective and interpretive nature of leadership meaning-making, especially in contexts where value enactment is deeply embedded in local norms and personal convictions<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, Chan (2019) highlights that even leadership culture-fit models, though theoretically rich, rarely engage with the lived narratives of leaders navigating these intersections<sup>2</sup>.

This gap in the literature reflects a broader need to reconceptualize how leadership communication and value internalization are studied. A phenomenological approach offers a compelling alternative one that privileges the first-person perspective and seeks to understand the essence of experience as it unfolds in context. By adopting this lens, research can move beyond surface-level observations to reveal the deeper structures of meaning, emotion, and reflection that inform leadership actions. Phenomenology, therefore, is not only methodologically suitable but epistemologically necessary to capture the complexity and authenticity of the phenomenon in question.

Previous research has addressed leadership and organizational culture from various perspectives, including strategic communication, organizational behavior, and leadership ethics. Several studies have explored how leaders influence corporate culture through messaging and behavior, yet few have prioritized the leaders' own lived experiences in shaping value internalization. Theoretical contributions from leadership authenticity and cultural intelligence have informed our understanding of leadership effectiveness, but often from a conceptual or behavioral viewpoint. Studies utilizing qualitative designs tend to focus on group-level perceptions, rather than individual, first-person experiences. This leaves a gap in comprehending how leaders personally construct and navigate value-based expectations within culturally complex settings.

This study addresses that gap by adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach. Phenomenology enables a deep exploration of how meaning is experienced and constructed from the perspective of the individual, which is essential for understanding leadership as a lived phenomenon. The method is well-suited to reveal the internal processes through which leaders interpret, reconcile, and enact organizational values across diverse contexts. By doing so, this study responds to the knowledge gap identified earlier: the need to move beyond generalized frameworks and engage directly with the subjective narratives of leaders. The insights produced here aim to offer a more authentic, experiential contribution to leadership and organizational communication literature.

This article is organized as follows. The introduction outlines the research problem and rationale for using a phenomenological approach. The next section presents the study's context and participant criteria, followed by a detailed explanation of the interpretative phenomenological methodology. Subsequent sections describe the procedures of data collection and analysis, with an emphasis on identifying core themes. The article concludes with a discussion of findings, theoretical implications, and practical contributions, followed by a summary of conclusions.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This research employed an interpretative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of organizational leaders in internalizing corporate values within multinational environments. The phenomenological approach was selected due to its emphasis on understanding how individuals make sense of their lived realities, particularly within complex and context-specific social phenomena. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the specific framework, as it enables the investigation of subjective meanings through both descriptive and

interpretative layers. This design facilitated the in-depth exploration of how leaders perceive, internalize, and enact corporate values in culturally diverse organizational settings, thus aligning with the study's objective to uncover nuanced, meaning-laden experiences.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct and sustained experience with leadership roles in multinational corporations where value internalization is a recognized strategic imperative. Inclusion criteria included holding a senior leadership position (e.g., director, VP, or higher), having a minimum of five years of experience in culturally diverse teams, and active involvement in value communication processes. Exclusion criteria included individuals not currently in leadership positions or lacking direct responsibility for cultural or organizational value initiatives. A total of eight participants (five males and three females), aged between 38 and 56 years, were included in the study. All participants had experience working across at least three different national cultures, providing a rich foundation for investigating cross-cultural dynamics in leadership communication.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in quiet and private settings, either in-person or via encrypted video conferencing platforms. A standardized interview guide was used to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility to pursue emergent topics. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. To ensure comfort and openness, participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point, and interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language, later translated as necessary while preserving contextual integrity.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach involved multiple stages: (1) repeated readings of each transcript to gain familiarity, (2) identification of meaning units and emergent themes, (3) clustering of related themes across cases, and (4) extraction of superordinate themes representing shared experiential structures. Data organization and coding were facilitated by NVivo software, which aided in managing the qualitative dataset without altering the interpretative process. The analytic procedure emphasized both idiographic focus understanding individual cases in depth and cross-case analysis to distill essential themes that capture the collective meaning-making processes of participants.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, including permission for audio recording and anonymized use of quotations. Anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details in transcripts. Data confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, in accordance with applicable ethical standards such as the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant local data protection regulations..

## **RESULTS**

This study explored the lived experiences of organizational leaders in internalizing corporate values within multinational contexts. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, several key themes emerged that encapsulate the subjective meanings derived from in-depth interviews with selected participants. These themes reveal the nuanced communication processes, emotional dynamics, and leadership reflections embedded in the act of value internalization.

### **Navigating Cultural Tensions through Communicative Adaptation**

Participants frequently described the necessity of adapting communication strategies to align with diverse cultural expectations while staying true to organizational values. This adaptation process was often marked by tension, self-reflection, and strategic flexibility.

“At one point, I had to pause and consider how do I explain ‘integrity’ to a team that has a different historical understanding of hierarchy and power? I had to translate the value without diluting it.” (Participant 3)

These narratives highlight how leaders operationalize value transmission not merely as top-down instruction, but as an interactive cultural negotiation requiring empathy and linguistic sensitivity.

### **Embodied Leadership and the Burden of Representation**

Leaders often experienced the expectation to embody the corporate values they advocate. This embodiment was not limited to communication style, but extended to personal conduct in professional and social settings. Such expectations were perceived as both empowering and burdensome.

“People are always watching. Even when I’m not speaking, I’m communicating the culture. That’s heavy, especially when you’re tired or facing personal struggles.” (Participant 6)

This theme reflects the psychological labor inherent in value embodiment and the implicit demand for congruency between message and messenger in a multicultural environment.

### **The Role of Vulnerability in Building Cultural Credibility**

Participants emphasized that showing vulnerability and authenticity, especially during failures or ethical dilemmas, strengthened their credibility in promoting values. This stood in contrast to earlier leadership paradigms rooted in authority and control.

“When I admitted I mishandled a team conflict and apologized, something shifted. Suddenly, people started talking more openly about our values. It was real not just corporate jargon.” (Participant 1)

This finding underscores the emerging leadership practice of relational transparency as a vehicle for value internalization within organizational life.

#### **Theme 4: Hybrid Communication and Disruption of Informal Value Transmission**

Many participants noted that the shift to hybrid work environments disrupted informal, incidental opportunities for value reinforcement such as hallway conversations, shared lunches, and spontaneous mentoring.

“Online meetings are efficient, yes, but sterile. You can’t ‘model culture’ through a webcam the way you can over coffee. We lost something subtle but powerful.” (Participant 4)

This theme illustrates how digital communication reshapes not only the medium but also the essence **of cultural continuity in organizations.**

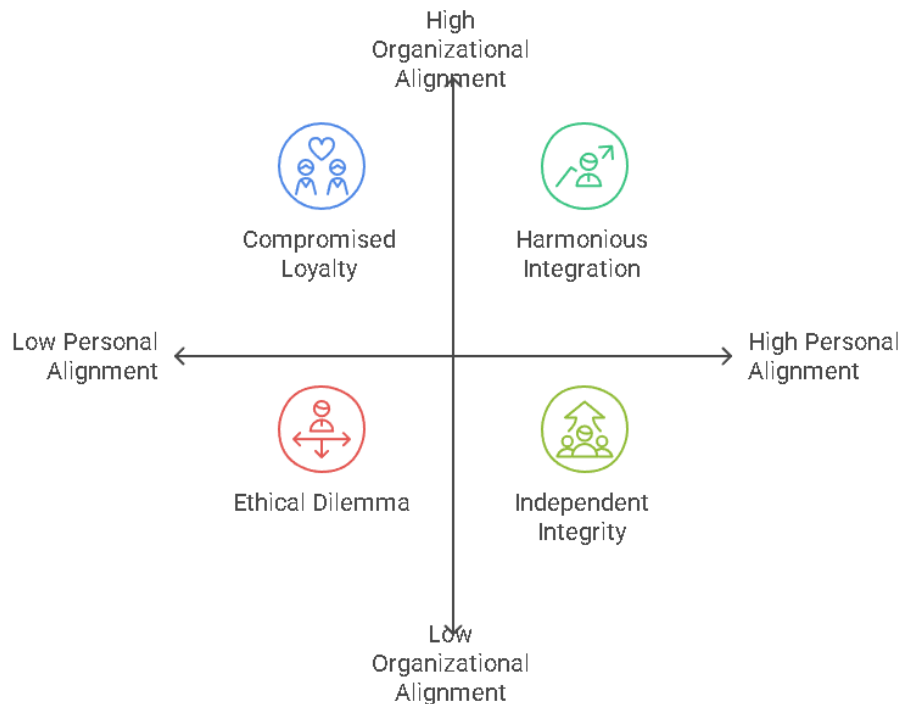
### **Internal Conflicts Between Personal and Organizational Values**

Several leaders recounted moments of internal conflict where their personal ethics diverged from corporate norms or strategic directions. These instances prompted reflective negotiation of identity and loyalty.

“There was a moment when I asked myself: am I still aligned with this company? Or am I compromising too much just to be accepted?” (Participant 7)

This theme reveals the existential layer of value internalization not as passive absorption but as an ongoing identity work shaped by context, power, and conscience.

### **Navigating Personal and Organizational Values**



The five themes collectively reveal that internalizing corporate values in multinational settings is a deeply interpretative, emotionally charged, and contextually embedded process. It involves continuous sense-making, communicative calibration, and identity negotiation by leaders striving to remain authentic while fulfilling organizational expectations. These lived experiences underscore the necessity of reframing leadership communication not merely as transmission but as cultural co-construction.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed five essential themes that reflect how organizational leaders experience the internalization of corporate values within multinational contexts. These themes ranging from communicative adaptation to value embodiment and identity conflict illustrate the complex, deeply personal processes by which leaders navigate cultural expectations, organizational norms, and personal integrity. These results directly address the central research question concerning how leaders interpret and enact corporate values in multicultural environments.

The lived experiences of participants suggest that value internalization is not a linear or procedural task, but a dynamic, meaning-laden process involving continuous negotiation of context, culture, and self. Leaders become both interpreters and symbols of organizational values, often experiencing emotional strain, identity dilemmas, and a loss of informal communicative rituals in hybrid work environments. These narratives respond to the central inquiry by demonstrating that the internalization of values occurs through experiential, reflective engagement rather than compliance with prescriptive frameworks. The study thus contributes a nuanced understanding of leadership as a situated, culturally contingent act of meaning-making.

This interpretation finds alignment and contrast with existing literature. For example, previous work by Chan (2019) emphasized the importance of cultural fit in leadership behavior but did not explore how leaders internalize these cultural expectations on a personal level<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, Müller (2020) criticized the reductionism of survey-based leadership research, underscoring the need for qualitative depth<sup>1</sup> an argument supported by the rich experiential insights uncovered in this study. Moreover, the significance of vulnerability and authenticity in leadership resonates with the work of Avolio and Gardner (2005) on authentic leadership, but this study adds empirical texture by highlighting how such authenticity is not a static trait but a practiced response to moral ambiguity and

cultural tension. The disruption of informal value transmission in hybrid settings also complements recent discussions on the limitations of virtual leadership communication (Wilson & Keller, 2021), indicating a need to rethink leadership presence in digitally mediated environments.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study offer significant implications for both theory and practice. From a social and cultural standpoint, the narratives reveal that leadership is a lived, interpretive act situated within the tension between organizational ideals and cultural diversity. These insights suggest that corporate value internalization is not merely a managerial function but a human process of alignment, resistance, and meaning-making. For practitioners, the results highlight the need for leadership development programs that emphasize reflective practice, cultural humility, and dialogical engagement, rather than rigid value transmission. More broadly, these findings invite organizations to reconsider how value integration strategies account for individual meaning and cultural nuance, especially in increasingly hybrid and transnational workplaces.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the interpretative phenomenological approach provided rich, contextualized insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study involved a relatively small and purposively selected group of senior leaders, which limits the generalizability of the findings to broader leadership populations or hierarchical levels. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported narratives may introduce recall bias or social desirability influences, despite efforts to ensure authenticity. The cultural contexts represented, while diverse, are not exhaustive, and further research may uncover different themes across other sociocultural or organizational settings. These limitations are inherent to the idiographic nature of phenomenological inquiry and serve to guide, rather than constrain, future investigations.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

The present study opens several avenues for future research. One possibility is to extend phenomenological inquiry to other levels of leadership, including middle managers or emerging leaders, to examine whether similar experiences of value internalization and identity negotiation are present. Longitudinal designs could also provide insight into how leaders' experiences evolve over time, particularly in response to organizational change or cultural transition. Additionally, comparative phenomenological studies across different sectors such as healthcare, education, or public administration may reveal how context shapes the enactment and interpretation of corporate values. Future research can build upon these findings to develop a more grounded, human-centered model of leadership communication that bridges cultural diversity with organizational integrity.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how organizational leaders internalize corporate values within culturally diverse multinational settings, utilizing an interpretative phenomenological approach. The analysis revealed that this internalization is not a uniform or procedural process, but one shaped by leaders' efforts to navigate cultural dissonance, identity challenges, and adaptive communication. Rather than viewing leadership communication as a fixed competency, the findings underscore it as a situated practice in which leaders interpret and embody values in real time, shaped by emotional, relational, and cultural variables.

This research moves beyond prior models by offering a grounded understanding of how leaders actively negotiate value alignment in dynamic organizational landscapes. Specifically, it highlights the need for leadership development programs to integrate cross-cultural reflexivity, ethical awareness, and experiential training that simulates real-world complexity. These practical insights are especially relevant for global organizations striving to build cohesive cultures without erasing local identity. Looking ahead, future studies should consider longitudinal methods to explore how value internalization evolves over time and in response to institutional transitions, such as mergers, leadership turnover, or digital transformation. Comparative research across industries or national

contexts could also clarify which elements of value enactment are universal and which are context-specific.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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