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# Cross-Cultural Management in Multinational Enterprises: A Case Study of the Coca-Cola Company

Kouzi Lei <sup>1,\*</sup><sup>1</sup> Wuhan Business University, Wuhan, China

\* Correspondence: Lei Kouzi, Wuhan Business University, Wuhan, China

**Abstract:** With the rapid acceleration of economic globalization, multinational enterprises increasingly operate across highly complex and culturally diverse environments, making effective cross-cultural management a decisive factor influencing overall organizational performance, competitive resilience, and long-term sustainability. Inherent cultural differences fundamentally shape employees' core values, interpersonal communication patterns, leadership expectations, and intrinsic motivational preferences. Consequently, these dynamics create multifaceted challenges for multinational enterprises seeking to seamlessly integrate globally dispersed workforces while maintaining operational coherence. This paper systematically explores how multinational enterprises can achieve superior cross-cultural management through the implementation of adaptive and culturally sensitive human resource management strategies. Particular emphasis is placed on the critical domains of talent recruitment, cross-cultural training programs, tailored motivation mechanisms, and comprehensive employee development frameworks. Drawing on established theoretical paradigms of cross-cultural management and international human resource management, this study adopts a rigorous qualitative, theory-informed case analysis approach, utilizing the Coca-Cola Company as a primary illustrative example. The in-depth analysis demonstrates that culturally responsive yet strategically integrated human resource practices empower multinational enterprises to effectively transform cultural diversity from a potential operational friction point into a robust source of organizational flexibility, heightened employee engagement, and sustained competitive advantage. Ultimately, this paper significantly contributes to the broader cross-cultural management literature by explicitly highlighting the strategic, indispensable role of sophisticated human resource systems in successfully balancing the dual imperatives of global integration and local responsiveness within modern multinational enterprises.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural management; human resources; multinational enterprises; cultural diversity; case study

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## 1. Introduction

Economic globalization has fundamentally reshaped the organizational landscape of modern enterprises. Advances in transportation, communication technologies, and international trade liberalization have enabled firms to expand beyond national boundaries and operate on a global scale. Multinational enterprises now coordinate production, marketing, and management activities across multiple countries, each embedded in distinct cultural, institutional, and social environments. While globalization provides access to new markets and talent pools, it simultaneously introduces unprecedented complexity to organizational management, particularly in relation to cross-cultural coordination [1]. This complexity arises from the need to navigate diverse cultural norms and practices, which can significantly impact the effectiveness of management strategies and organizational outcomes.

Culture plays a central role in shaping individual behavior within organizations. It encompasses shared values, beliefs, norms, and patterns of communication that influence how people perceive authority, cooperation, competition, and achievement. Employees

from different cultural backgrounds may hold divergent expectations regarding leadership style, decision-making processes, teamwork, and performance evaluation. Consequently, management practices that are effective in one cultural context may be misunderstood, resisted, or rejected in another [2]. For multinational enterprises, the inability to manage such cultural differences effectively can lead to communication breakdowns, reduced employee morale, lower productivity, and even strategic failure. Therefore, understanding and integrating cultural nuances into management practices is crucial for fostering a harmonious and productive work environment.

Human resource management occupies a particularly critical position in cross-cultural management because it directly concerns people who embody cultural values [3]. Recruitment practices determine who enters the organization, training systems shape skills and attitudes, incentive mechanisms influence motivation, and employee development programs shape long-term career trajectories. Each of these functions is deeply embedded in cultural assumptions. A standardized human resource approach that ignores local cultural contexts may undermine employee engagement, while excessive localization may weaken organizational coherence and strategic integration. Thus, finding a balance between global standardization and local adaptation is essential for effective human resource management in multinational enterprises.

Against this backdrop, cross-cultural human resource management has emerged as a central research and practical issue in international management. Scholars argue that multinational enterprises must balance global integration and local responsiveness to achieve sustainable competitiveness. This paper addresses the question of how multinational enterprises can design and implement effective cross-cultural human resource management strategies. Using Coca-Cola as an illustrative case, the paper analyzes how culturally adaptive recruitment, training, motivation, and employee development practices contribute to organizational effectiveness in a global context. By examining these practices, the paper aims to provide insights into how multinational enterprises can navigate the complexities of cross-cultural management to enhance their global operations and achieve long-term success [4].

## **2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background**

### *2.1. Culture and cross-cultural management*

The study of culture has long occupied a central position in international management research. One of the most influential contributions is the cultural dimensions theory, which conceptualizes culture as a collective programming of the mind distinguishing members of one group from another. This theory identifies several key cultural dimensions, including power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term orientation. These dimensions provide a systematic framework for comparing cultural differences across societies and understanding their implications for organizational practices [5]. By examining these dimensions, researchers and practitioners can gain insights into how cultural values influence organizational behavior, decision-making, and leadership styles. This understanding is crucial for developing effective management strategies that are culturally sensitive and adaptable to diverse environments.

Power distance refers to the extent to which individuals accept unequal distributions of power within organizations. In high power-distance cultures, hierarchical authority and centralized decision-making are generally accepted, while low power-distance cultures emphasize equality, participation, and decentralized authority. Individualism versus collectivism reflects whether people prioritize personal goals and autonomy or group harmony and collective responsibility [6]. These cultural orientations significantly influence leadership expectations, communication styles, and motivation systems. Understanding these cultural dimensions is essential for managers to effectively navigate cross-cultural interactions and foster an inclusive workplace environment. By recognizing

and respecting these differences, organizations can enhance collaboration, improve employee satisfaction, and achieve better overall performance.

Complementing the cultural dimensions framework, other scholars emphasize how cultures differ in their approaches to resolving organizational dilemmas, such as universalism versus particularism and achievement versus ascription. Their work highlights that cultural differences are not merely abstract values but actively shape organizational interactions and decision-making processes. Together, these frameworks underscore the importance of cultural context in shaping managerial effectiveness. By integrating these perspectives, organizations can develop more nuanced strategies that account for cultural variability, thereby enhancing their ability to operate successfully in a globalized business environment. This comprehensive understanding of cultural dynamics is vital for fostering innovation, improving cross-cultural communication, and achieving sustainable competitive advantage [7].

### *2.2. International human resource management*

International human resource management is centered on the effective management of personnel within multinational enterprises that operate across various national borders [8]. Unlike domestic human resource management, international human resource management must navigate additional complexities that arise from cultural diversity, legal differences, and institutional variations. It is widely recognized that multinational enterprises encounter a fundamental strategic tension between the need for global standardization and the necessity for local adaptation. This tension requires careful balancing to ensure both efficiency and cultural sensitivity.

Global standardization is intended to maintain consistency in corporate values, policies, and performance standards across all subsidiaries, thereby enhancing control and operational efficiency. On the other hand, local adaptation allows subsidiaries to customize human resource practices to align with local cultural and institutional contexts, which can enhance legitimacy and employee acceptance [9]. However, an overemphasis on standardization may overlook cultural diversity, while excessive adaptation could lead to a fragmented organizational identity. Therefore, finding the right balance is crucial for maintaining a cohesive yet flexible organizational structure.

Empirical research indicates that successful multinational enterprises often adopt hybrid or transnational approaches. These approaches effectively integrate global strategic coherence with local responsiveness, allowing organizations to thrive in diverse environments. Human resource management is pivotal in implementing such strategies by embedding cultural sensitivity into recruitment, training, incentives, and career development systems. This integration ensures that the organization not only respects local customs and practices but also maintains a unified corporate identity, thereby fostering a harmonious and productive work environment across all its global operations [10].

## **3. Research Question and Methodological Approach**

This study aims to explore the following research question in depth and detail, focusing on the complexities and nuances involved in the subject matter [11].

The central inquiry of this research is: How can multinational enterprises effectively manage cross-cultural dynamics through adaptive human resource management strategies tailored to diverse cultural contexts, thereby enhancing their overall competitiveness in the global market?

Instead of employing a quantitative approach to test specific hypotheses, this paper utilizes a qualitative, theory-driven analytical framework. Coca-Cola serves as an illustrative example due to its extensive global operations and significant experience in managing culturally diverse workforces. With subsidiaries in both developed and emerging economies, Coca-Cola offers a relevant context for examining how multinational enterprises can balance global integration with cultural adaptation in their human resource management practices [12].

The analysis leverages cross-cultural management theory and international human resource management literature to interpret Coca-Cola's practices in areas such as recruitment, training, motivation, and employee development. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive empirical case study but rather to generate analytical insights that are both theoretically informed and relevant to managerial practices. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the strategic considerations multinational enterprises must navigate in diverse cultural environments.

#### 4. Case Analysis

As a leading multinational enterprise, the Coca-Cola Company exemplifies how cross-cultural human resource management can be effectively integrated into global operations. Operating in over 200 countries and regions, Coca-Cola manages a workforce characterized by diverse cultural values, institutional frameworks, and labor market conditions. Instead of implementing a rigid, standardized human resource management model, Coca-Cola has developed a culturally adaptive approach. This approach harmonizes global corporate principles with an acute awareness of local cultural contexts. This section delves into Coca-Cola's cross-cultural human resource management strategies, focusing on four key areas: recruitment, training, motivation, and employee development. By examining these areas, we gain insights into how Coca-Cola successfully navigates the complexities of managing a diverse global workforce [13].

##### 4.1. Culturally adaptive recruitment strategies

Recruitment is the initial and foundational stage of human resource management, as it determines the cultural and professional characteristics of individuals who enter the organization. In a cross-cultural context, recruitment practices must address differences in cultural values related to authority, teamwork, merit, and social relationships. Coca-Cola recognizes that recruitment systems designed according to Western managerial assumptions may not translate effectively into all cultural environments. As a result, the company adopts a localization-oriented recruitment strategy while maintaining overarching global competency standards. This approach allows Coca-Cola to tailor its recruitment processes to align with the cultural nuances of different regions, ensuring that the candidates selected are not only qualified but also culturally compatible with the organizational ethos.

In collectivist cultures, particularly in parts of Asia and the Middle East, interpersonal relationships and group harmony play a critical role in professional life. In such contexts, Coca-Cola places greater emphasis on candidates' ability to integrate into teams, maintain long-term working relationships, and align with collective goals. Recruitment processes may include group interviews, situational assessments, and evaluations of candidates' interpersonal skills, which help assess social compatibility and cooperative orientation. By contrast, in individualistic cultures such as the United States and Western Europe, recruitment focuses more strongly on individual achievement, problem-solving ability, and personal initiative. Candidates are typically assessed based on their professional accomplishments, analytical skills, and potential for independent contribution. This dual approach ensures that Coca-Cola can effectively navigate the diverse cultural landscapes in which it operates, thereby enhancing its ability to attract and retain talent that is both competent and culturally attuned.

This differentiated recruitment approach reflects Coca-Cola's recognition that cultural preferences influence perceptions of fairness and job suitability. Aligning recruitment criteria with local cultural expectations not only improves employee-organization fit but also enhances organizational legitimacy in host-country labor markets. At the same time, Coca-Cola ensures consistency by applying global ethical standards and baseline competency requirements across all regions, thereby balancing localization with corporate coherence. This strategy not only facilitates a more harmonious integration of employees into the corporate structure but also strengthens the company's reputation as a culturally sensitive and globally aware employer [14]. By maintaining a balance between

local adaptation and global consistency, Coca-Cola is able to foster a diverse and inclusive workforce that is well-equipped to meet the challenges of a dynamic global market.

#### *4.2. Cross-cultural training and organizational learning*

Training is a vital mechanism through which multinational enterprises convey corporate values, align employee behavior, and cultivate cross-cultural competence. Given the cultural diversity of its workforce, Coca-Cola invests significantly in training programs that blend global standardization with local customization [15]. This dual-layered approach reflects the company's strategic goal of fostering a shared organizational identity while enabling employees to function effectively within their specific cultural environments. By doing so, Coca-Cola ensures that its workforce is not only aligned with the company's overarching objectives but also sensitive to the nuances of local cultures, which is crucial for maintaining harmony and efficiency in a diverse work setting.

On a global scale, Coca-Cola offers standardized training modules that focus on corporate values, leadership principles, ethical conduct, and brand philosophy. These programs are designed to ensure that employees across various subsidiaries develop a unified understanding of the company's mission and strategic priorities. Such global training is crucial for maintaining organizational consistency and supporting cross-border coordination within a multinational enterprise. By instilling a common set of values and principles, Coca-Cola can effectively manage its global operations while ensuring that all employees are working towards the same goals, thereby enhancing overall organizational cohesion.

At the local level, Coca-Cola tailors training content to reflect culturally specific norms, communication styles, and market conditions. For instance, in East Asian cultural contexts influenced by Confucian values, training programs emphasize respect for hierarchy, indirect communication, and relationship-oriented negotiation. Employees are trained to exhibit cultural sensitivity in interactions with colleagues, customers, and business partners. Conversely, in Anglo-American contexts, training often focuses more on assertive communication, individual accountability, and participatory problem-solving. This localized approach ensures that employees are well-equipped to navigate the cultural intricacies of their respective environments, thereby enhancing their effectiveness and adaptability [16].

Beyond the development of functional skills, Coca-Cola actively promotes cross-cultural training initiatives aimed at enhancing employees' cultural intelligence. International assignments, cross-border project teams, and intercultural workshops provide employees with exposure to diverse cultural environments and management practices. These experiences facilitate organizational learning by encouraging the transfer of knowledge across subsidiaries and reducing the likelihood of cultural misunderstandings. Through these mechanisms, Coca-Cola transforms cultural diversity into a source of organizational learning and innovation, rather than a barrier to coordination [13]. By leveraging the diverse perspectives and experiences of its workforce, Coca-Cola can drive innovation and maintain a competitive edge in the global market.

#### *4.3. Culturally differentiated motivation and incentive systems*

Employee motivation is profoundly shaped by cultural values, making the design of incentive systems a significant challenge in cross-cultural human resource management. Coca-Cola recognizes that motivational drivers differ across cultural contexts and that uniform incentive systems may not effectively engage employees. As a result, the company implements culturally differentiated incentive mechanisms that align with both corporate performance objectives and local value systems. This approach ensures that the motivational strategies are relevant and effective in various cultural settings, enhancing the overall engagement and productivity of the workforce.

In individualistic cultures, such as that of the United States, motivation is often closely linked to personal achievement and autonomy. Coca-Cola's incentive systems in these environments focus on individual performance metrics, including sales targets, leadership contributions, and innovation outcomes. Employees who exhibit exceptional

performance are rewarded through merit-based bonuses, accelerated promotion opportunities, and increased decision-making authority. This strategy aligns with cultural expectations that emphasize self-actualization and competition, thereby fostering a work environment that encourages personal growth and achievement.

Conversely, in collectivist cultures where group harmony and shared responsibility are prioritized, Coca-Cola places a greater emphasis on team-based incentives and collective recognition. Performance assessments in these contexts often include team outcomes and collaborative efforts [8]. Rewards may consist of group bonuses, collective training opportunities, or public recognition of team achievements. Such incentive mechanisms reinforce social cohesion, strengthen group identity, and encourage cooperation among employees, thereby creating a supportive and collaborative work environment that aligns with the cultural values of these regions.

Beyond financial incentives, Coca-Cola acknowledges the significance of non-monetary motivators, such as social recognition, job stability, and opportunities to contribute to meaningful organizational goals. In cultures characterized by a long-term orientation, employees may place greater value on career security and organizational loyalty than on short-term financial rewards. By aligning incentive systems with culturally grounded motivational preferences, Coca-Cola enhances employee engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment across diverse regions. This comprehensive approach ensures that employees feel valued and motivated, contributing to the overall success and sustainability of the organization.

#### *4.4. Employee development and career management across cultures*

Employee development is a crucial long-term investment in human capital, essential for maintaining the competitive edge of multinational corporations. Coca-Cola's strategy for employee development is attuned to the cultural nuances of career expectations, while simultaneously supporting a globally cohesive talent management framework. This approach ensures that the company can effectively nurture and retain talent across diverse cultural landscapes, thereby enhancing its global operational capabilities.

In cultures with high power distance, such as India, there is often an expectation for well-defined hierarchical structures and formalized promotion pathways. Coca-Cola addresses these cultural expectations by implementing structured career ladders, transparent promotion criteria, and centralized leadership development programs. This clarity and structure provide employees with a sense of stability and fairness, which reinforces their trust in the organizational systems. By aligning career development strategies with cultural expectations, Coca-Cola fosters a work environment that is perceived as equitable and reliable [16].

Conversely, in cultures that prioritize flexibility and innovation, such as those found in the United States and parts of Northern Europe, employees often value diverse career experiences and opportunities for personal development [12]. Coca-Cola caters to these preferences by encouraging job rotation, cross-functional assignments, and project-based work arrangements. These development pathways enable employees to acquire a broad range of skills, adapt to evolving organizational needs, and pursue personalized career trajectories. This approach not only supports individual growth but also enhances the organization's adaptability and innovation capacity.

A key component of Coca-Cola's global talent management system is the identification and nurturing of high-potential employees who are capable of assuming leadership roles in multinational settings. Through international mobility programs and global leadership development initiatives, employees are exposed to diverse cultural environments and strategic challenges. These experiences are instrumental in cultivating leaders who are globally minded and adept at navigating cultural complexities. Such leaders are essential for supporting organizational integration and driving the company's success in a globalized market.

## **5. Discussion**

The Coca-Cola case serves as a compelling example of how cross-cultural human resource management can be transformed into a strategic advantage rather than being perceived as a source of organizational complexity. Instead of viewing cultural diversity as a managerial challenge or a hindrance to efficiency, Coca-Cola illustrates that cultural differences can be strategically leveraged to enhance organizational learning, innovation, and adaptability. By integrating cultural sensitivity into its human resource systems, the company aligns employee behavior with both global strategic objectives and local cultural expectations, thereby reinforcing organizational cohesion across its geographically dispersed operations. This approach not only facilitates smoother operations but also enhances the company's ability to innovate and adapt in diverse cultural settings.

From an organizational learning perspective, Coca-Cola's cross-cultural human resource practices significantly enhance the exchange of knowledge and managerial insights among subsidiaries operating in varied cultural environments. Initiatives such as cross-border training programs, international mobility opportunities, and culturally adaptive management practices enable employees to gain diverse perspectives and develop innovative problem-solving approaches. This continuous cultural interaction enriches the organization's capacity to respond to dynamic market conditions and fosters innovation through the integration of diverse ideas. In this context, cultural diversity acts as a catalyst for learning and renewal, rather than a constraint on coordination, thereby contributing to the organization's overall agility and competitiveness.

From a theoretical standpoint, the analysis supports the notion that hybrid human resource management models, which integrate global consistency with local responsiveness, are particularly effective in multinational contexts. Coca-Cola's approach embodies the core principles of the transnational management framework, which emphasizes the simultaneous achievement of global integration and local adaptation. By standardizing core values, ethical principles, and leadership competencies globally, the company ensures strategic alignment and a unified organizational identity [9]. At the same time, localized human resource practices allow subsidiaries to effectively address culturally embedded employee expectations. This balanced approach mitigates the risks associated with excessive standardization or localization, thereby contributing to sustained organizational performance in complex international environments.

Furthermore, the findings reinforce existing cross-cultural management theories by demonstrating how human resource management serves as a critical mediating mechanism between cultural diversity and organizational outcomes. Cultural dimensions such as individualism-collectivism and power distance do not directly determine performance; rather, their impact is shaped by how organizations design and implement their human resource systems. Coca-Cola's experience suggests that culturally aligned recruitment, training, motivation, and development practices can transform potential cultural frictions into sources of engagement, trust, and commitment [11]. This transformation is crucial for fostering a cohesive and motivated workforce that is capable of achieving organizational goals in a culturally diverse environment.

From a managerial perspective, the discussion underscores the importance of institutionalizing cultural awareness within human resource management rather than addressing cross-cultural challenges on an ad hoc or reactive basis. Treating cross-cultural issues as isolated problems to be resolved informally may lead to inconsistent management practices and perceptions of inequity among employees. Instead, embedding cultural sensitivity within formal policies and systems ensures coherence, predictability, and fairness across the organization. Managers play a crucial role in translating corporate human resource strategies into culturally appropriate practices while maintaining alignment with global standards. This strategic alignment is essential for ensuring that the organization remains competitive and responsive to the needs of its diverse workforce.

In addition, the discussion highlights the necessity for multinational enterprises to invest in the development of cross-cultural competencies among managers and employees. Cultural awareness, intercultural communication skills, and global leadership

capabilities should be regarded as strategic resources essential for long-term competitiveness. Coca-Cola's experience demonstrates that organizations which systematically cultivate these capabilities are better positioned to manage complexity, build trust across borders, and sustain competitive advantage in the global marketplace [9]. By prioritizing the development of these competencies, companies can enhance their ability to navigate the challenges of operating in diverse cultural environments and maintain a strong competitive edge.

## 6. Conclusion

In an increasingly interconnected global economy, cross-cultural management has become indispensable for multinational enterprises. This paper has examined how adaptive human resource management strategies enable multinational enterprises to navigate cultural diversity effectively. Using Coca-Cola as an illustrative case, the study demonstrates that culturally responsive recruitment, training, motivation, and employee development practices enhance organizational effectiveness and competitive advantage. By fostering an inclusive environment that respects and leverages cultural differences, companies can not only improve employee satisfaction and retention but also drive innovation and market expansion. The ability to adapt human resource practices to diverse cultural contexts is crucial for sustaining long-term success in the global marketplace.

The findings contribute to cross-cultural management literature by highlighting the strategic role of human resource systems in balancing global integration and local responsiveness. For practitioners, the study underscores the importance of viewing cultural diversity as a resource to be managed strategically rather than a problem to be minimized. This perspective encourages organizations to develop policies that are both globally coherent and locally adaptable, thereby enhancing their ability to compete in diverse markets. Future research may extend this analysis through empirical studies and comparative investigations across industries and cultural contexts. Such research could explore the specific mechanisms through which cultural diversity impacts organizational outcomes and identify best practices for managing diverse workforces in various settings.

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