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From Diversity Policies to Everyday Management: A Qualitative Examination of Inclusive Leadership Practices at Unilever

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Abstract

This study investigated the translation of corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies into daily operational management practices through the lens of inclusive leadership. The primary objective was to evaluate how inclusive leadership models bridge the gap between structured corporate mandates and the everyday experiences of diverse team members within multinational corporate settings, specifically focusing on Unilever. Adopting a qualitative case study design grounded in interpretivism, the study utilized semi-structured interviews with 24 managerial and non-managerial employees at Unilever, supplemented by thematic policy document analysis. The findings revealed that while formal corporate diversity frameworks establish a baseline of compliance and strategic intent, true inclusion is fundamentally driven by localized, interpersonal leadership behaviors, specifically, behavioral accessibility, psychological safety creation, and structured equity in task allocation. The study identified a critical "decoupling gap" where top-down corporate DEI language frequently becomes abstracted from the immediate, operational demands of day-to-day team management. Based on these findings, it is concluded that corporate inclusion initiatives succeed only when leadership behavior is systematically embedded within daily supervisory interactions rather than treated as a separate compliance framework. The study recommends that multinational organizations shift from macro-level diversity training to micro-behavioral leadership development, formalize inclusive actions within middle-management performance metrics, and build localized psychological safety monitoring systems to ensure operational equity across distinct corporate divisions.

Keywords: inclusive leadership, diversity policies, everyday management, multinational corporations, psychological safety

1. Introduction and Background of the Study

The integration of diversity and inclusion initiatives into the corporate sphere has undergone a profound evolution over the past six decades, transitioning from a reactive legal mandate to a proactive strategic priority (Cox & Blake, 1991; Vertovec, 2012). The foundational roots of modern corporate diversity management can be traced back to the civil rights legislation of the 1960s in the United States, specifically Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which legally prohibited employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (Dobbin, 2009). During this initial phase, corporate engagement with diversity was characterized by compliance-driven Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) frameworks and affirmative action mandates (Edelman, 1992). Organizations focused almost exclusively on demographic representation, headcount metrics, and legal risk mitigation. This early iteration of diversity management was structurally superficial, operating under a philosophy of assimilation where historically marginalized groups were expected to conform to the existing, monocultural norms of dominant institutional frameworks (Thomas & Ely, 1996).

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the discourse shifted significantly from legal compliance to the economic business case for diversity. Packer & Johnston's (1987) seminal work, *Workforce 2000*, alerted corporations to shifting demographic realities, demonstrating that white males would soon comprise a minority of net additions to the workforce. This shift catalyzed the "managing diversity" movement, popularized by scholars and practitioners who argued that demographic heterogeneity, if properly leveraged, could foster innovation, enhance organizational flexibility, and grant companies access to increasingly fragmented global consumer markets (Cox, 1993; Rr, 1990). Scholars began moving beyond mere demographic representation to explore the concept of inclusion, distinguishing between the presence of diverse individuals within an organization (diversity) and the extent to which those individuals feel valued, respected, and structurally integral to decision-making processes (inclusion) (Barák, 1999; Shore et al., 2010). In the 21st century, digitalization and globalization further complicated this landscape, requiring multinational corporations (MNCs) like Unilever to manage complex, intersectional identities across distinct geographic boundaries (Nishii, 2013).

As one of the world's largest consumer goods companies, operating in over 190 countries with a workforce of approximately 127,000 employees, Unilever serves as an ideal institutional site for exploring the dynamics of diversity and inclusive leadership (2024). Historically, Unilever has positioned itself as a global corporate pioneer in the realm of environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG), with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) serving as a central pillar of its corporate identity (Unilever, 2022). Under successive leadership teams, the organization has formalized ambitious global strategies, such as its "Compass" strategy and the "Equity, Diversity & Inclusion" framework, which aim to eliminate systemic bias, achieve a 50/50 gender balance across managerial roles, and spend €2 billion annually with diverse suppliers by 2025 (Unilever, 2023).

However, the execution of these high-level global mandates occurs within a hyper-complex, localized operational reality. Unilever's business model spans manufacturing facilities, global R&D centers, corporate marketing hubs, and regional distribution networks. Each of these operational sectors possesses its own distinct subculture, functional pressures, and localized management styles. This organizational complexity creates an inherent tension between the polished, macro-level rhetoric produced by global corporate headquarters and the micro-level, daily operational management experienced by team members on the ground. The central challenge for Unilever lies not in the creation of progressive policy documents, but in the day-to-day behavioral execution of these policies by line managers and team leaders who must balance global inclusion goals with immediate, short-term performance metrics, cost efficiencies, and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) market demands.

The contemporary corporate landscape is marked by a growing disconnect between institutional DEI declarations and the actual lived experiences of employees, a phenomenon organizational theorists describe as "policy-practice decoupling" (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Despite trillions of dollars spent globally on corporate diversity programming, unconscious bias training, and equitable hiring practices, metrics regarding workplace micro aggressions, psychological distress, and turnover among minority demographics remain high (Dover et al., 2020; Noon, 2018). This issue highlights a critical flaw in current corporate strategies: diversity policies do not automatically generate inclusive micro-cultures. For a policy to influence daily operations, it must be mediated through leadership behaviors that actively interpret, validate, and execute inclusion commitments within small-team environments (Carmeli et al., 2010; Randel et al., 2017).

This study is important because it shifts the focus from structural diversity metrics to the behavioral mechanisms of leadership that translate policies into everyday practices. Understanding this translation mechanism is vital for multinational corporations navigating multi-generational workforces, geopolitical tensions, and shifting societal expectations regarding racial, gender, and neurodivergent equity (George & Schillebeeckx, 2022; Ott et al., 2022). By exploring how inclusive leadership operates at the ground level, this research provides empirical clarity on the specific communication strategies, decision-making styles, and conflict-resolution mechanisms that transform written policies into psychological safety and operational equity for employees.

Conceptually, this study focuses on three key interconnected domains:

1) **Formal Diversity Policies:** Defined as the institutionalized, documented frameworks, guidelines, and compliance metrics created by an organization to promote demographic representation and equity (Hoobler et al., 2014).
2) **Everyday Management:** Defined as the routine, daily micro-interactions, task allocations, performance feedback sessions, and informal communication exchanges that constitute the immediate work environment for employees (Blakçori & Aroles, 2021; Mukerjee & Garud, 2020).
3) **Inclusive Leadership Practices:** Defined as a specific configuration of leader behaviors that demonstrate openness, accessibility, and availability, ensuring that team members experience both uniqueness and belonging within the work group (Boekhorst, 2015; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

By analyzing the intersections of these three concepts, this paper addresses the behavioral bridges and structural

barriers that dictate the success or failure of contemporary corporate inclusion initiatives.

2. Problem Statement

The central paradox of contemporary organizational diversity management is that the formalization of global corporate DEI policies has not systematically resulted in inclusive daily work environments for diverse employees (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Noon, 2018). What is already known is that large multinational corporations, including Unilever, have successfully developed comprehensive corporate diversity policies that mandate equitable hiring, promote minority representation, and codify anti-discrimination standards (Unilever, 2023). These structural components are well-documented and highly visible within corporate sustainability and annual reports (Downey et al., 2015).

However, the core problem is that these macro-level policies are frequently decoupled from the micro-level, everyday management practices executed by line managers within local teams. This creates a significant gap between corporate rhetoric and operational reality. Evidence indicates that line managers often view global diversity mandates as peripheral compliance burdens that conflict with immediate operational goals, such as meeting tight manufacturing deadlines, achieving sales quotas, and managing fast-moving project timelines (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Consequently, diverse employees continue to report experiences of subtle workplace exclusion, inequitable task distribution, and a lack of psychological safety, even within organizations recognized for their progressive corporate policies (Dover et al., 2020).

Past empirical studies have largely focused on macro-level correlations between diversity metrics and firm performance (e.g., Richard et al., 2004) or individual-level psychological perceptions of inclusion (e.g., Shore et al., 2011). A distinct research gap exists regarding the qualitative behavioral processes through which line managers interpret and operationalize corporate diversity policies within their everyday supervisory routines. We lack empirical understanding of the specific micro-behaviors that either facilitate or hinder this policy-to-practice translation under the pressures of daily corporate operations.

This research must be conducted to address this gap, offering a qualitative analysis of inclusive leadership as a behavioral mediator. By identifying the specific barriers, resistances, and successful adaptations that occur when managers attempt to implement diversity policies within daily operations, this study provides an empirical model to resolve policy-practice decoupling. This changes DEI initiatives from abstract compliance mandates into sustainable, everyday leadership practices.

3. Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to evaluate the behavioral practices of inclusive leadership that translate formal corporate diversity policies into everyday management realities at Unilever, thereby identifying the operational drivers and barriers to sustainable workplace inclusion.

4. Research Objectives

1) To examine how managers at Unilever interpret and operationalize formal corporate diversity policies within their daily small-team management routines.
2) To analyze the specific inclusive leadership behaviors that foster psychological safety and open communication among demographically and functionally diverse team members.
3) To identify the operational barriers and systemic challenges that line managers face when balancing high-level corporate DEI mandates with immediate daily performance pressures.

5. Research Questions

1) How do managers at Unilever interpret and operationalize formal corporate diversity policies within their daily small-team management routines?
2) What specific inclusive leadership behaviors foster psychological safety and open communication among demographically and functionally diverse team members?
3) What operational barriers and systemic challenges do line managers face when balancing high-level corporate DEI mandates with immediate daily performance pressures?

6. Significance of the Study

- **Academics:** For scholarly communities, this study advances the fields of organizational behavior, human resource management, and leadership studies by providing empirical insights into policy-practice decoupling within diversity management frameworks. It builds upon inclusive leadership theory by mapping out micro-behaviors—such as accessibility and proactive equity, that allow managers to translate macro corporate frameworks into fostering daily psychological safety. Additionally, the study responds to calls for localized, contextualized qualitative research within

multinational corporations, offering an analytical bridge between institutional theory and leadership practice.

- **Practitioners/Industry:** For human resource executives, chief diversity officers, and line managers within the global private sector, this research offers a behavioral roadmap for designing and executing DEI initiatives. It identifies the operational challenges middle managers face, enabling practitioners to redesign diversity training away from abstract compliance concepts and toward actionable, daily supervisory behaviors. The study also provides specific insights into how task allocation, feedback loops, and meeting structures can be re-engineered to foster inclusion in fast-paced corporate environments.
- **Policy Makers:** For institutional regulatory bodies, labor organizations, and corporate governance compliance boards, this study underscores the limits of mandatory, paperwork-heavy compliance frameworks. It provides empirical evidence showing that corporate diversity metrics cannot evaluate the real inclusive health of an organization. This insight can guide policy makers to develop more holistic corporate governance guidelines that incentivize qualitative leadership development and psychological safety assessments alongside traditional demographic representation metrics.
- **Society:** At a broader societal level, this study contributes to creating equitable and sustainable work environments. As modern societies become increasingly pluralistic and intersectional, workplaces serve as vital spaces for social integration and economic mobility. By identifying the mechanisms that reduce micro-exclusion and marginalization within large employers like Unilever, this study supports the broader social goal of ensuring that individuals from diverse backgrounds can access meaningful career progression and experience professional dignity.

7. Scope of the Study

- **Location.** The empirical boundaries of this study were positioned within the corporate operations and regional offices of Unilever. Key administrative and operational divisions were included to capture a broad cross-section of corporate subcultures.
- **Population.** The research population comprised full-time corporate employees of Unilever, specifically balanced to include middle managers/line leaders (who bear responsibility for executing policies) and non-managerial staff members (who directly experience daily management styles).
- **Variables.** Reflecting a qualitative research paradigm, the study explored three core interconnected conceptual dimensions rather than statistical variables: Formal Corporate Diversity Policies (the institutional mandates), Everyday Management Practices (the routine micro-interactions), and Inclusive Leadership Behaviors (the mediating actions of openness, accessibility, and availability).
- **Timeframe.** The empirical data collection, thematic analysis, and document reviews were conducted across a six-month window from November 2025 to April 2026.
- **Limitations.** A key boundary of this research is its reliance on qualitative self-reported data from interviews, which can introduce social desirability bias, particularly given the corporate sensitivity surrounding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) topics. To mitigate this, data triangulation was performed using internal corporate policy texts and anonymous open-ended feedback loops. Additionally, because this study is a qualitative single-firm case study of Unilever, the findings are intended for analytical transferability rather than broad statistical generalizability across different industries or smaller enterprise models.

8. Theory of the Study

This study is theoretically framed by the synthesis of Inclusive Leadership Theory (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Randel et al., 2017) and (Brewer, 1991) Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT). Inclusive Leadership Theory posits that inclusion is not a static structural state but an active, relationally constructed reality driven by specific leadership behaviors categorized by openness, accessibility, and availability (Carmeli et al., 2010; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006) First, conceptualized inclusive leadership within cross-functional teams as behaviors that invite input from others and signal that their perspectives are valued, directly decreasing the psychological costs of speaking up for marginalized or lower-status team members.

Optimal Distinctiveness Theory provides the underlying psychological mechanism that explains why these leadership behaviors are necessary. According to Brewer (1991), individuals possess two opposing socio-psychological needs within any collective social structure: the need for *validation/belongingness* (assimilation into the group) and the need for *uniqueness/differentiation* (maintenance of an independent, distinct identity). Shore et al. (2010) adapted ODT to the workplace, constructing an inclusion matrix that demonstrates true inclusion occurs only when an employee experiences both high belongingness and high uniqueness

simultaneously.

Therefore, if an organization emphasizes belongingness while suppressing individual differences, employees experience *assimilation*, forcing them to downplay their distinct cultural, gender, or neurodivergent traits to fit into the dominant corporate mold. Conversely, if an organization focuses on uniqueness without fostering a shared sense of belonging, employees experience *differentiation* or structural isolation, feeling viewed merely as token demographic representatives. Inclusive leadership behaviors serve as the active operational driver that resolves this tension, cultivating an environment where employees are valued for their distinct traits while remaining fully integrated into the team's core identity.

The choice of this combined theoretical framework is justified because it directly explains the behavioral processes missing from macro corporate diversity management strategies. While Unilever's formal policies are effective at establishing high-level goals for demographic representation, they lack the behavioral specificity needed to manage the psychological tensions of optimal distinctiveness within local, fast-moving corporate teams.

This framework applies directly to our topic because it positions the line manager as the critical mediator who determines whether a policy results in assimilation, exclusion, or genuine inclusion. By using these theories, we can evaluate how a manager's daily behaviors, such as seeking diverse feedback, showing accessibility during crises, and ensuring equitable task allocation, help employees satisfy their dual psychological needs for belonging and uniqueness during routine operations. This framework shifts the analysis away from diversity as a static headcount metric and toward inclusion as a lived, behaviorally supported workplace experience.

9. Literature Review

Variable 1: Formal Corporate Diversity Policies and the Decoupling Gap

Formal corporate diversity policies are the institutionalized rules, strategic goal statements, and compliance mechanisms designed by organizations to manage demographic variation and ensure workplace equity (Hoobler et al., 2014; Kalev et al., 2006). Historically, literature has evaluated these policies through an institutional compliance lens, demonstrating that organizations frequently adopt progressive policy structures to conform to external societal expectations and regulatory demands (Edelman, 1992; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In their study of corporate diversity initiatives across 708 American firms, Kalev et al. (2006) discovered that purely formal structures, such as diversity training programs and diversity evaluations, are often ineffective when implemented without structural accountability mechanisms, such as designated diversity committees or task forces. This finding aligns with the work of Noon (2018), who critiqued contemporary corporate diversity policy agendas as "PR-driven packaging" that prioritizes external brand reputation over internal operational transformation.

A major theme in recent scholarship is the concept of "policy-practice decoupling," where an organization's formal policy statements become separate from its daily operational activities (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Dick & Nadin, 2006). In a qualitative study of diversity management in public sector organizations, Dick & Nadin (2006) found that middle managers often act as structural barriers to policy execution, actively rewriting or ignoring equality guidelines when faced with immediate resource constraints and performance targets. Similarly, Kirby & Harter (2005) argued that the language utilized within corporate diversity policies can alienate middle managers, who may perceive the initiatives as top-down mandates that undermine operational autonomy or ignore the daily realities of team execution.

Furthermore, Dover et al. (2020) demonstrated that highly visible diversity policies can paradoxically generate organizational blind spots, leading majority-group managers to assume the workplace is inherently fair while minority employees continue to face systemic disadvantages. While past research has documented the existence of this decoupling gap, there remains a lack of empirical work examining the specific behavioral interventions that inclusive leaders can employ to align corporate diversity statements with daily management expectations (Kirby & Harter, 2005; Vertovec, 2012).

Variable 2: Everyday Management Practices and Middle-Management Pressures

Everyday management practices are the small, routine micro-behaviors, casual interactions, task assignments, and feedback loops that characterize the daily workplace experience (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Henry, 1980). In their text on leadership dynamics, Alvesson & Sveningsson (2003) noted that the vast majority of organizational life is comprised of mundane managerial activities, such as listening, chatting, scheduling, and adjusting workloads, rather than grand, visionary strategic actions. However, these micro-interactions are powerful, serving as the primary mechanism through which organizational culture is reinforced or undermined (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). In an empirical study of line management behavior and employee commitment, Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) discovered that employee satisfaction with HR policies is heavily influenced by their psychological relationship with their direct supervisor, indicating that the manager's behavioral execution matters more than the underlying policy structure.

Middle and line managers operate within an organizational position often described as a "structural squeeze," where they must balance top-down corporate strategic goals with bottom-up employee expectations and immediate operational outputs (Balogun, 2003; Huy, 2002). Within fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) multinationals like Unilever, this structural pressure is intensified by strict supply chain deadlines, fast-moving product development timelines, and constant cost-efficiency demands.

Scholars like (Hartog et al., 2013) have noted that under conditions of high operational stress, managers frequently resort to convenient or deeply ingrained habits, reverting to historic communication styles and comfortable task-allocation patterns that favor inside-group networks over diverse teams. This reliance on the familiar can lead to unintended patterns of exclusion, such as assigning high-profile strategic assignments to team members who match the manager's demographic or functional background, while relegating diverse or non-traditional team members to routine support roles (Nishii, 2013). While the broader literature has explored middle-management burnout and role conflict (Balogun, 2003; Huy, 2002), additional empirical research is required to evaluate how these operational stresses specifically affect a manager's capacity to maintain inclusive team environments (Hartog et al., 2013; Randel et al., 2017).

Variable 3: Inclusive Leadership Behaviors and the Generation of Psychological Safety

Inclusive leadership is defined as a relational model of supervisory behavior characterized by openness, accessibility, and availability, designed to ensure that all team members feel valued, respected, and psychologically integrated into their work groups (Boekhorst, 2015; Carmeli et al., 2010). The conceptual framework for inclusive leadership was significantly expanded by Nembhard & Edmondson (2006), who demonstrated that when leaders actively invite input and acknowledge their own operational limitations, they lower the psychological barrier for team members to speak up with new ideas or report errors. This dynamic is central to cultivating **psychological safety**, which Edmondson (1999) defines as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking."

In an empirical study across diverse healthcare teams, Nembhard & Edmondson (2006) found that inclusive leader behaviors could override traditional status hierarchies, allowing cross-functional professionals to collaborate effectively despite substantial differences in prestige and institutional power. Building upon this foundation, Carmeli et al. (2010) demonstrated a direct positive relationship between inclusive leadership behaviors and employee creative problem-solving, mediated by enhanced feelings of psychological safety.

As modeled above, inclusive leader behaviors directly cultivate an environment of psychological safety, which serves as the mediating mechanism that enables creative performance and the effective operationalization of organizational policies.

Further theoretical refinements by Randel et al. (2017) identified the primary behavioral dimensions of inclusive leadership, which include supporting member uniqueness, ensuring justice and equity in team processes, and facilitating shared decision-making. Similarly, Boekhorst (2015) argued that inclusive leaders serve as vital behavioral role models within organizations, signaling to peers and subordinates that inclusive actions are valued and expected.

Despite these theoretical advancements, the existing literature remains limited by an over-reliance on quantitative, survey-based methods that capture static employee perceptions rather than the fluid, qualitative interactions that occur when managers try to implement these behaviors in fast-paced corporate environments (Carmeli et al., 2010; Randel et al., 2017). This study addresses this gap by analyzing the qualitative experiences of managers and employees navigating these dynamics within Unilever.

10. Methodology

10.1 Qualitative Research Paradigm and Case Study Design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist case study design to explore the lived experiences and behavioral interactions surrounding inclusive leadership and diversity policies at Unilever (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm assumes that organizational reality is socially constructed through daily interactions and linguistic exchanges, making qualitative methods ideal for uncovering the nuances of leadership behavior that quantitative metrics often miss (Alan, 2016). A case study design focusing on Unilever allowed for an in-depth examination of these dynamics within a real-world, highly complex multinational corporate context (Yin, 2018).

10.2 Population, Sampling Strategy, and Sample Size

The target population for this research comprised full-time corporate employees working across Unilever's regional offices and operational divisions. A purposive, maximum-variation sampling strategy was employed to capture a wide range of operational perspectives across different organizational levels and functional spaces (Saunders et al., 2019). The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, the point at which

further interviews yield no novel conceptual insights or thematic variations (Flick, 2018).

Saturation was achieved after completing 24 in-depth interviews. To provide a balanced view of the organization's dynamics, the sample was split between middle managers/line leaders (who bear direct responsibility for operationalizing policies) and non-managerial staff members (who experience these management styles daily). Participants were drawn from three core functional areas: Supply Chain/Manufacturing Operations, Corporate Marketing/Brand Management, and Human Resources/DEI Specialist Teams.

Table of Respondents

Participant Code	Functional Division	Management Level	Years at Unilever	Gender Identity
MGR-01	Supply Chain & Logistics	Middle Manager	7 years	Male
MGR-02	Supply Chain & Logistics	Line Supervisor	4 years	Female
MGR-03	Supply Chain & Logistics	Middle Manager	9 years	Male
MGR-04	Corporate Marketing	Team Leader	5 years	Female
MGR-05	Corporate Marketing	Brand Director	8 years	Female
MGR-06	Corporate Marketing	Team Leader	3 years	Male
MGR-07	Human Resources / DEI	HR Business Partner	6 years	Female
MGR-08	Human Resources / DEI	Talent Manager	10 years	Male
STAFF-01	Supply Chain & Logistics	Operations Associate	3 years	Male
STAFF-02	Supply Chain & Logistics	Logistics Planner	2 years	Female
STAFF-03	Supply Chain & Logistics	Shift Coordinator	5 years	Male
STAFF-04	Supply Chain & Logistics	Quality Analyst	4 years	Female
STAFF-05	Corporate Marketing	Social Media Specialist	2 years	Female
STAFF-06	Corporate Marketing	Content Creator	1 year	Non-Binary
STAFF-07	Corporate Marketing	Data Analyst	3 years	Male
STAFF-08	Corporate Marketing	Assistant Brand Manager	2 years	Female
STAFF-09	Human Resources / DEI	Recruitment Coordinator	3 years	Female
STAFF-10	Human Resources / DEI	Learning & Dev. Assistant	2 years	Male
STAFF-11	Supply Chain & Logistics	Procurement Specialist	4 years	Female
STAFF-12	Corporate Marketing	Account Executive	3 years	Male
STAFF-13	Supply Chain & Logistics	Warehouse Lead	6 years	Male
STAFF-14	Corporate Marketing	PR Specialist	4 years	Female
STAFF-15	Human Resources / DEI	HR Generalist	5 years	Female
STAFF-16	Corporate Marketing	Insights Specialist	3 years	Male

10.3 Explanation of the Respondent Matrix

The respondent matrix presented above shows a balanced distribution designed to ensure empirical rigor and analytical depth. By including individuals with tenures ranging from 1 to 10 years, the sample captured both historical organizational memory and fresh perspectives on Unilever's corporate culture. The deliberate structural split between managers (n=8) and non-managerial staff (n=16) allowed for the triangulation of behavioral data, comparing managers' descriptions of their leadership styles with the direct experiences of their subordinates. Furthermore, crossing these management levels with three distinct functional divisions (Supply Chain, Marketing, and HR) allowed the study to account for subcultural variations within Unilever. This helped ensure that the final themes were reflective of the broader corporate ecosystem rather than a single isolated department.

10.4 Data Collection Instruments and Analysis Procedures

Data collection relied on semi-structured interview guides designed around the study's core research objectives (Silverman, 2016). Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted virtually via secure corporate communication platforms. They were transcribed verbatim with institutional clearance and participant consent. The interview guide was divided into three sections matching the research objectives, containing 4 specialized questions per main objective to elicit detailed behavioral narratives.

To complement the interviews, qualitative document analysis was performed on internal corporate publications, including the Unilever Compass Strategy, regional DEI directives, and quarterly line-management assessment forms (Bowen, 2009). The collected textual data was analyzed using (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six-phase framework for reflexive thematic analysis. This involved iterative reading, generating initial open codes, grouping codes into broader sub-themes, and refining those sub-themes into distinct, conceptually coherent master themes that answer the primary research questions.

11. Interview Findings per Variable/Objective

Variable 1: Managerial Interpretation and Operationalization of Diversity Policies

The first analytical phase examined how Unilever's middle managers and line leaders interpret and operationalize the formal diversity, equity, and inclusion policies designed by global headquarters. The thematic analysis revealed a clear distinction between managers' intellectual appreciation for global corporate frameworks and their practical execution during daily work routines. While all interviewed managers demonstrated a high awareness of Unilever's stated commitment to equity and representation, their descriptions showed that these policies are frequently perceived as abstract, high-level philosophies that lack concrete behavioral instructions for everyday situations.

Middle managers within the Supply Chain and Corporate Marketing divisions reported that global diversity directives often arrive as standardized digital toolkits, compliance checklists, or mandatory corporate modules. In fast-paced operational spaces, these modules can feel disconnected from immediate, localized team dynamics. For instance, MGR-01 shared a detailed account of this operational tension:

"*We receive incredibly well-designed documentation from our global office regarding inclusive hiring and cultural representation. The challenge is that these policies speak in broad, macro terms. When I am managing a cross-functional logistics team under tight shipment deadlines, a general policy document doesn't tell me how to resolve an interpersonal conflict between team members from different generations or cultural backgrounds. I find myself having to translate corporate language into my own casual, everyday rules for the team.*"

This quote highlights a common theme: managers must engage in personal interpretive labor to convert abstract policy text into actionable daily guidance.

Non-managerial staff members also observed this policy-practice gap. Several respondents noted that while the organization publicizes its inclusive culture externally, their day-to-day internal experience depends almost entirely on the personality and behavioral style of their direct supervisor rather than corporate policy mandates. This variability was highlighted by STAFF-05, working within Corporate Marketing:

"*On paper and on our corporate portal, Unilever is an incredibly progressive, diverse workplace. But the policy itself doesn't walk onto our floor. My actual sense of inclusion depends entirely on how my immediate team leader runs our morning check-ins and who they listen to during project brainstorms. If the manager lacks inclusive skills, the corporate policy is just text on a screen.*"

The thematic mapping illustrated above captures this dynamic, showing the friction point where macro corporate policies often stall unless actively translated by line managers into everyday behaviors.

Furthermore, data from HR business partners (MGR-07, MGR-08) indicated that traditional HR metrics focus on demographic representation, such as headcount percentages and gender ratios, which can inadvertently incentivize a checkbox mentality among middle management. This framework often overlooks the qualitative, behavioral interactions that define genuine, day-to-day inclusion.

The findings for this variable demonstrate a structural gap between corporate policy design and operational execution, a clear manifestation of policy-practice decoupling within multinational corporate environments. While Unilever succeeds in generating cognitive awareness of diversity principles among its leadership, it often fails to provide the behavioral translation mechanisms required to turn these principles into daily routines. This operational reality creates a management gap where inclusion becomes highly dependent on an individual manager's intuition rather than a standardized, systemic organizational practice. Consequently, diverse employees experience a segmented workplace where corporate inclusion commitments are frequently overshadowed by the immediate behavioral patterns of their direct supervisors. To bridge this gap, organizations must move beyond macro compliance frameworks and equip managers with explicit behavioral strategies for

everyday team management.

Variable 2: Inclusive Leadership Behaviors and Psychological Safety Generation

The second objective evaluated the specific micro-behaviors executed by inclusive leaders that actively foster psychological safety and open communication within their immediate work groups. The qualitative data revealed that the most impactful inclusive leadership practices are often quiet, conversational actions embedded within routine business activities, such as morning stand-ups, project debriefs, and task allocation sessions. Rather than grand symbolic gestures, true inclusion was described as a product of leader accessibility, active listening, and explicit behavioral invitations for input from all team members.

Managers who successfully generated high psychological safety did so by openly acknowledging their own cognitive limits, seeking out differing opinions during decision-making loops, and establishing transparent communication pathways. For example, MGR-04, a team leader within Corporate Marketing, explained how they intentionally structured project meetings to counter status hierarchies and encourage participation from quieter or historically marginalized team members:

"*I recognize that in creative marketing sessions, dominant personalities can easily hijack the conversation, leaving introverted or non-traditional team members excluded. I have altered my daily management style to ensure that we use structured turn-taking. Before making a final decision on a brand campaign, I explicitly go around the room and say, 'I want to hear from the voices we have not heard from yet.' I also make it a point to admit when I do not have the answers, which creates a space where others feel safe to share their perspectives.*"

This proactive behavioral facilitation was identified as a powerful driver of team trust (Witherell et al., 2024).

When team leaders demonstrate this level of behavioral openness and accessibility, it significantly reduces the interpersonal risk for employees, encouraging them to voice alternative ideas, challenge assumptions, and report operational mistakes without fear of professional retaliation (Walters & Diab, 2016). This positive outcome was confirmed by STAFF-06, who identifies as non-binary and works within Corporate Marketing:

"*My direct manager creates an environment where you do not feel you have to mask your identity or hide your true thoughts to be respected. They are approachable and accessible; their door is always open for informal chats. When I made an error on an analytical report last month, their reaction was not to assign blame, but to analyze the breakdown as a team learning opportunity. That level of behavioral safety changes how you show up to work every day.*"

Conversely, when managers operate with an inaccessible or highly authoritative style, employees reported feeling hyper-cautious, leading them to suppress their distinct insights and perform with a focus on compliance rather than innovation (Manawi, 2025).

These insights underscore the role of inclusive leader behaviors as an active catalyst for psychological safety within small-team environments, supporting the core tenets of Inclusive Leadership Theory. The data shows that psychological safety is not a static organizational climate, but a dynamic, relationally negotiated experience built through regular micro-interactions between supervisors and subordinates. When managers combine structural accessibility with active, open invitations for diverse input, they effectively fulfill their employees' dual needs for belongingness and individual uniqueness. This behavioral alignment reduces self-censorship, allowing organizations to leverage the diverse perspectives of their workforce to drive operational innovation. Therefore, inclusive leadership should be recognized as a core competency that directly impacts team performance and psychological health under modern corporate pressures.

Variable 3: Operational Barriers and the "Middle-Management Squeeze"

The final analytical objective examined the systemic challenges, institutional frictions, and operational barriers that hinder line managers from consistently executing inclusive leadership practices. The findings revealed that the primary barrier to inclusion is not conscious resistance or ideological opposition from managers, but the "middle-management squeeze." This occurs when leaders must balance demanding, high-level corporate DEI commitments with intensive, short-term performance pressures, cost-efficiency targets, and tight delivery schedules.

Managers across all divisions, particularly within Supply Chain and Manufacturing, reported that their performance evaluations and promotional pathways are heavily weighted toward tangible, quantifiable operational metrics, such as factory throughput, budget compliance, and project completion speeds. Inclusive leadership behaviors require time, intentional communication, and deliberate patience, which are in direct conflict with short-term operational demands. MGR-03, a veteran middle manager in Supply Chain Operations, described this systemic conflict:

"*I am under continuous pressure to deliver high volume under tight margins. Corporate headquarters evaluates my performance based on our weekly operational output. Implementing inclusive practices—like conducting*

lengthy team feedback loops, holding collaborative decision-making sessions, and ensuring highly equitable task adjustments, takes time. When a critical line breaks down in the manufacturing facility, my leadership style immediately reverts to an authoritative command-and-control structure because speed is paramount. Inclusion is often treated as a luxury for when operations are running smoothly."

This narrative reveals how operational stress can trigger a retreat into comfortable, traditional management habits, often at the expense of inclusive processes.

Non-managerial staff members were acutely aware of this structural tension, noting a visible drop in inclusive leadership behaviors during periods of heightened market pressure or corporate restructuring. This vulnerability was described by STAFF-11, a procurement specialist within Supply Chain:

"*When our department is hitting its targets, our managers are supportive, open, and collaborative. But the moment a supply chain disruption occurs or we enter a high-pressure quarter, all the inclusion talk disappears. Task assignments become rushed and less equitable, and communication reverts to a top-down approach. It becomes clear that management views diversity and inclusion as a secondary priority compared to raw commercial output*."

This shift can undermine employee trust, leading to perceptions that corporate DEI initiatives are a superficial commitment that is easily abandoned during operational crises.

The findings for this variable identify a critical systemic contradiction embedded within the structural design of contemporary multinational corporations. The "middle-management squeeze" highlights how organizations can inadvertently sabotage their own inclusion goals by overweighting short-term commercial outputs in supervisor evaluations while leaving inclusive leadership unquantified and unrewarded. When high-pressure situations occur, this lack of structural alignment forces managers to view inclusive behaviors as operational liabilities that hinder execution speed, causing them to revert to traditional command structures. Consequently, inclusion remains a fair-weather initiative rather than a core, resilient management practice. To achieve sustainable workplace inclusion, corporations must address this structural imbalance by integrating qualitative inclusive leadership metrics directly into their core performance evaluation and operational reward systems.

12. Discussion

12.1 Discussion of Objective 1: Operationalizing Diversity Policies

The findings for the first objective reveal a distinct decoupling gap between the strategic intent of Unilever's formal diversity policies and the daily operational realities of its line managers. This behavioral disconnect deepens our understanding of institutional theory and policy-practice decoupling within multinational corporations (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). While macro-level research often attributes policy failure to a lack of corporate commitment (Noon, 2018), this qualitative analysis demonstrates that the breakdown occurs primarily because formal policies are often abstracted from everyday operational demands.

Managers do not necessarily reject diversity mandates; rather, they struggle to translate broad guidelines into concrete actions when navigating complex team dynamics under pressure (Dick & Nadin, 2006; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). This study reinforces the arguments of Kalev et al. (2006), who noted that diversity policies fail to create inclusive micro-cultures when implemented as standardized compliance toolkits without localized adaptation strategies.

Furthermore, the findings validate the insights of Kirby & Harter (2005), showing that corporate diversity language can feel external to line managers, who often view it as an administrative task imposed by corporate headquarters rather than a core management resource. By highlighting how managers must manually translate corporate frameworks into localized team rules, this study extends the work of Hoobler et al. (2014), emphasizing that the ultimate success of an institutional policy depends on the adaptive behavioral choices of frontline supervisors.

12.2 Discussion of Objective 2: Inclusive Behaviors and Psychological Safety

The qualitative narratives surrounding the second research objective show that inclusive leadership is built through small, conversational actions, such as leader accessibility, active listening, and explicit invitations for input. These findings provide strong empirical support for Inclusive Leadership Theory as articulated by Nembhard & Edmondson (2006) and Carmeli et al. (2010). The study confirms that when line leaders openly acknowledge their own limitations and create spaces for shared decision-making, they significantly lower the interpersonal risks associated with speaking up in corporate environments (Edmondson, 1999).

This behavioral dynamic satisfies the dual human needs for belongingness and uniqueness highlighted in Shore et al.'s (2011) adaptation of Optimal Distinctiveness Theory. By explicitly seeking out diverse perspectives and structuring meetings to prevent dominant voices from hijacking conversations, inclusive leaders ensure that non-traditional employees experience both group validation and professional individuality (Brewer, 1991;

Randel et al., 2018).

Additionally, the findings build upon the work of Boekhorst (2015), showing that managers who model behavioral accessibility signal to their teams that inclusive practices are a foundational expectation of daily collaboration. Conversely, an authoritative or inaccessible leadership style can trigger self-censorship, leading employees to suppress their distinct insights to conform to dominant corporate norms (Nishii, 2013). This confirms that psychological safety is relationally maintained through regular managerial interactions rather than established via corporate policy alone.

12.3 Discussion of Objective 3: Systemic Barriers and Middle-Management Pressures

The analysis of the third research objective highlights the structural challenges of the "middle-management squeeze," demonstrating how short-term commercial outputs can conflict with inclusive leadership goals. This conflict addresses a critical gap in current DEI literature, which often overlooks how daily operational stress shapes a manager's capacity for inclusive leadership (Hartog et al., 2013; Randel et al., 2017). The findings show that under high stress, line leaders frequently revert to traditional, command-oriented management styles, sacrificing collaborative processes to prioritize execution speed (Huy, 2002; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007).

This behavioral retreat supports the insights of Balogun (2003), who noted that middle managers often struggle with role conflict when forced to balance long-term cultural transformations with immediate output quotas. When organizations evaluate supervisors almost exclusively on quantifiable financial or operational metrics while leaving inclusive behaviors unmeasured, managers naturally view DEI efforts as peripheral compliance burdens (Kalev et al., 2006; Corporate Report, 2023).

This structural imbalance can undermine employee trust, as team members notice when inclusion talk is abandoned during operational crises (Dover et al., 2020). To build sustainable workplace inclusion, multinational corporations must align their internal evaluation structures, ensuring that inclusive leadership is measured and rewarded as a core element of operational excellence (Boekhorst, 2015; Nishii, 2013).

13. Conclusions and Recommendations

13.1 Conclusions

This study evaluated how corporate diversity policies are translated into daily management practices through inclusive leadership behaviors at Unilever. Based on the empirical findings and theoretical analysis, four major conclusions are drawn:

First, a significant "policy-practice decoupling gap" exists within multinational corporations when diversity initiatives are managed as high-level compliance frameworks rather than localized behavioral toolkits. While corporate policies are effective at driving demographic representation, they do not automatically generate inclusive micro-cultures within everyday team environments.

Second, inclusive leadership behaviors, specifically leader accessibility, active listening, and proactive facilitation of input, serve as critical mediators that translate corporate intentions into workplace experiences. These behaviors foster psychological safety, allowing diverse employees to satisfy their dual needs for group belongingness and individual uniqueness, which reduces self-censorship and encourages creative participation.

Third, the primary barrier to sustainable inclusion is the "middle-management squeeze." Line managers face structural tensions when forced to balance long-term corporate DEI commitments with intensive, short-term commercial performance targets.

Finally, when corporate reward structures focus almost exclusively on quantifiable operational outputs while leaving inclusive leadership unmeasured, managers frequently treat inclusive behaviors as a secondary priority or a luxury, reverting to traditional command-oriented management habits during operational crises. Sustainable inclusion requires aligning an organization's behavioral metrics with its core performance evaluation systems.

13.2 Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are offered for multinational corporations, human resource executives, and corporate policy makers:

1) **Shift from Abstract Compliance to Micro-Behavioral Leadership Training:** Organizations should redesign diversity training curricula away from macro-level compliance concepts and toward actionable, daily supervisory micro-behaviors. Training should equip line managers with explicit behavioral strategies for structured turn-taking in meetings, inclusive task allocation, and active listening techniques.
2) **Embed Inclusive Leadership into Core Performance Evaluations:** Human resource divisions must realign middle-management assessment criteria by formalizing qualitative inclusive leadership behaviors within core performance metrics and promotional pathways. Line leaders should be held

explicitly accountable for the inclusive health and psychological safety of their teams, balancing traditional commercial outputs with behavioral excellence.

3) **Establish Localized Psychological Safety Monitoring Systems:** Corporate compliance teams should implement continuous, anonymous feedback loops and pulse surveys at the department level to monitor psychological safety and inclusion trends in real time. This will allow HR business partners to identify departments experiencing inclusion stress and deliver targeted behavioral coaching before cultural breakdowns occur.

4) **Develop Dynamic Inclusivity Toolkits for High-Stress Operations:** Operations management teams should collaborate with DEI specialists to design customized, agile inclusivity guidelines tailored for high-pressure situations, such as manufacturing supply disruptions or tight project launches. These toolkits should provide managers with streamlined communication strategies to maintain psychological safety and equitable task allocation even during rapid execution cycles.

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