The Role of Leadership Development in Strategic Management Practice: A Mixed-Methods Case Study of Unilever Analysis

Ivan Ugochukwu Enebeli

Doctoral Researcher, Doctoral College, School of Business and Law, St Mary's University Twickenham, London, England

doi.org/10.51505/IJEBMR.2026.10804 URL: https://doi.org/10.51505/IJEBMR.2026.10804

Received: July 20, 2026 Accepted: July 30, 2026 Online Published: Aug 07, 2026

Abstract

This study examines the role of leadership development in strengthening strategic management practice within multinational corporations, using Unilever as an illustrative case. As a global consumer-goods leader operating in more than 190 countries, Unilever confronts complex, fast-changing market volatility that demands agile, ethical, and digitally fluent leadership. The study adopts a mixed-methods design that combines a secondary qualitative synthesis of publicly available Unilever documentation and published leadership scholarship with a primary quantitative survey of 25 Unilever employees, administered using a 14-item, five-point Likert-scale instrument. This design directly addresses a central limitation of earlier drafts of this research, namely an over-reliance on two non-independent, author-produced academic studies as the sole evidentiary base. Descriptive statistics, reliability testing, and correlation analysis of the survey responses are triangulated against the secondary case evidence across five thematic domains: leadership development structure and strategic alignment, sustainability and purpose-driven leadership, digital transformation, cross-cultural and cross-functional collaboration, and innovation and stakeholders engagement. The findings of the study indicate that employees perceive sustainability leadership, cross-departmental collaboration, and cultural intelligence as comparative strengths (means above 4.0 on a five-point scale), while strategic alignments and digital-skills readiness are perceived less consistently (means of 3.52 and 3.80 respectively, with the widest dispersion in the dataset). Correlation and reliability analysis reveal only weak associations between individual items and the overall strategic-management outcome measure, which is interpreted critically as evidence that the instrument captures genuinely distinct sub-constructs rather than a single underlying attitude, and as a caution against treating leadership development as a uniform, undifferentiated intervention. The study contributes a replicable framework, including a Leadership Return-on-Investment (ROI) approach with illustrative key performance indicators, for other multinational corporations seeking to align leadership development with strategic outcomes.

Keywords: Leadership Development, Strategic Management, Transformational Leadership, Digital Transformation, Stakeholder Engagement, Mixed-Methods Case Study.

1. Introduction

Unilever, a multinational consumer goods company operating in more than 190 countries, is widely regarded as a benchmark for strategic corporate leadership in the twenty-first century. With a diverse portfolio of brands and a long-standing commitment to sustainability, the company has consistently adapted to fast-changing global market dynamics while maintaining a clear organisational purpose. However, the complexity of its operations, spanning multiple cultures, sensitive markets, dynamic regulatory environments, and shifting consumer expectations, poses significant leadership challenges, including digital disruption, the acceleration of innovation, and the need to balance short-term performance against long-term sustainability goals. At the centre of these challenges lies a practical question: how can leadership development be systematically integrated into strategic management to support organisational resilience and growth? While Unilever has made notable progress in embedding sustainability and stakeholder engagement into its leadership ethos, the pace of change in the global business environment continues to demand more structured, evidence-based approaches to developing leaders who are operationally competent, ethically grounded, culturally intelligent, and digitally fluent.

This research investigates the role of leadership development in strengthening strategic management practice at Unilever. It pursues three objectives: (1) to analyse the alignment between leadership competencies and strategic objectives, drawing on both documented organisational practice and employees' own assessments; (2) to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of current leadership development initiatives using primary survey evidence rather than description alone; and (3) to propose actionable, measurable recommendations for closing the competency gaps identified. The significance of the research extends beyond Unilever to other multinational corporations facing comparable pressures, offering a transferable approach to treating leadership development as a strategic lever rather than a peripheral human-resources activity.

A central methodological weakness identified in an earlier review of this research was its reliance on two non-independent, author-produced postgraduate capstone project works as the sole data source, which raised legitimate concerns about originality, methodological rigor and replicability. This revised study addresses that weakness directly by adopting a mixed-methods design: a secondary qualitative synthesis of publicly available Unilever documentation and independently published leadership scholarship, triangulated with a primary quantitative survey of 25 Unilever employees. The survey instrument, its administration, and its analysis are described in full in Section 3, and the resulting statistical evidence is integrated throughout the results and discussion so that claims about employee perceptions are traceable to specific, reported data rather than to prior capstone research project work. Where the discussion draws on interpretation rather than directly reported evidence, this is flagged explicitly as such.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Leadership

Leadership theory has evolved considerably over the past century, with growing emphasis on the interplay between leadership style, organisational context, and strategic outcomes. Among the most influential models are transformational, situational, and authentic leadership, each offering a distinct lens on how leaders shape organisational performance.

Transformational Leadership: As conceptualised by Bass and Avolio (1994), emphasises idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. Leaders who embody this style of leadership inspire followers to transcend self-interest for the benefit of the organisation. In Unilever's case, Paul Polman's tenure as CEO is widely cited as an example of transformational leadership; his introduction of the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP) in 2010 reoriented the company's strategic focus toward long-term sustainability, illustrating how visionary leadership can reshape corporate purpose and stakeholders engagement (Unilever, 2017–2024).

Situational Leadership: Developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969), holds that effective leadership depends on the maturity and readiness of followers, requiring leaders to adapt their leadership style from directive to supportive, or according to context. Alan Jope's leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2023) is frequently cited as an example: faced with unprecedented disruption, Jope combined operational pragmatism with empathetic communication to sustain business continuity while protecting employee welfare (Unilever, 2017–2024).

Authentic Leadership: Advanced by Avolio and Gardner (2005), centres on self-awareness, relational transparency and ethical behaviour. This model is particularly relevant to stakeholders' capitalism, in which leaders are expected to act in alignment with wider societal values. Unilever's public commitments to ethical sourcing, environmental stewardship, and transparent reporting reflect authentic-leadership principles, reinforcing stakeholders' trust and brand equity. These three models are not mutually exclusive: in practice, leaders often combine elements of each, adapting their leadership styles and approach to circumstances as they arise. This integrative perspective aligns with Yukl and Lepsinger's (2005) concept of flexible leadership, which emphasises leaders' ability to move between leadership and management functions as required.

2.2 Strategic Management and Leadership Alignment

Strategic management involves the formulation and implementation of major goals and initiatives, typically undertaken by senior executives on the basis of internal resource assessment and external environmental scanning. Leadership plays a pivotal role in translating strategic intent into operational reality. Mintzberg (1987) argued that strategy is not merely a plan but a pattern of behaviour shaped by leadership decisions and organisational learning; the introduction of the USLP by Paul Polman in 2010 is a documented example of leadership reorienting strategic focus toward long-term sustainability, resilience, and portfolio expansion.

The alignment between leadership and strategic management is particularly critical in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments. Johansen (2012) emphasised that future-ready leaders require dilemma-flipping and immersive learning capabilities to navigate ambiguity. Barney's (1991) resource-based view (RBV) further frames leadership itself as a strategic resource: because leadership capability is difficult for competitors to imitate, it can constitute a genuine source of sustained competitive advantage when it is deliberately developed rather than left to emerge informally.

2.3 Leadership Development Frameworks and Competency Models

Contemporary leadership development draws on competency-based frameworks that specify the knowledge, skills, and behaviour leaders require to execute strategy effectively. Charan, Drotter, and Noel's (2001) leadership pipeline model, for instance, identifies distinct competency thresholds at each transition in a leader's career, from managing self to managing enterprise. Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, and McKee (2014) note that effective leadership development combines formal training with experiential learning, mentoring, and feedback mechanisms embedded in daily practice, rather than relying on episodic training events.

Cultural intelligence (Earley and Ang, 2003) and digital fluency (Kane, Palmer, Phillips, Kiron, and Buckley, 2015) have emerged as increasingly critical competencies for leaders of multinational organisations. Fountaine, McCarthy, and Saleh (2019) argue that digital transformation requires leaders who can reframe organisational culture around data-driven decision-making, not merely deploy new technologies. These competencies form the analytical basis for the constructs examined empirically in Sections 3 and 4 of this study.

2.4 Prior Research on Unilever's Strategic Leadership

A substantial published literature documents Unilever's leadership practice, including the company's own annual and sustainability reporting (Unilever, 2017–2024), Polman and Winston's (2021) first-hand account of the USLP era, and independent academic commentary on stakeholder capitalism (Freeman, Harrison, and Wicks, 2010; Eccles and Klimenko, 2019). This body of publicly available, independently verifiable material provides the secondary evidentiary base for the present study, replacing the two non-independent postgraduate capstone project work used in earlier drafts of this research. Using public-domain sources improves the replicability of the study, since any reader can retrieve and verify the same material, and reduces the risk of circularity that arises when a researcher analyses their own prior coursework as though it were independent evidence.

2.5 Conceptual Link Between Leadership Development and Organisational Performance

The conceptual literature converges on the view that leadership development influences organisational performance indirectly, by shaping the decision quality, adaptability, and engagement of the people who execute strategy (Day et al., 2014; Kotter, 2012). However, this literature is overwhelmingly qualitative and case-based; relatively few studies attempt to measure how leadership development is perceived by the employees who experience it day to day, rather than by the leaders who design or narrate it. This is the gap the present study addresses empirically through the primary survey described in Section 3, which asks Unilever employees directly to assess fourteen dimensions of leadership development and its perceived link to strategic outcomes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a convergent mixed-methods design, combining a secondary qualitative synthesis of publicly available Unilever documentation and independent leadership scholarship with a primary quantitative survey of Unilever employees. The two strands are collected and analysed separately and then triangulated at the interpretation stage, so that documented organisational practice can be checked against how that practice is actually experienced by employees. This mixed-method design was adopted specifically to resolve the central methodological weakness of earlier drafts of this research, in which the empirical base consisted of two non-independent, author-produced postgraduate capstone research project work (previously referred to as Unit 700 and Unit 801). Relying on one's own coursework as a data source raises unavoidable concerns about originality, circularity, and replicability, since the material is neither independently verifiable nor produced by a party with no stake in the study's conclusions. Replacing the material with (*a*) publicly available, citable secondary sources and (*b*) an independently collected primary survey addresses those concerns directly.

3.2 Secondary Data Sources

The secondary strand draws on Unilever's own published annual and sustainability reporting (Unilever, 2017–2024), Polman and Winston's (2021) published account of the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan era, and a wider body of independently peer-reviewed literature on leadership theory and strategic management cited throughout Section 2. These sources were selected because they are publicly accessible, independently produced, and citable to a verifiable original, which allows any reader to retrace the evidentiary basis of the analysis. Documents were read for content relating to four themes established in the literature review: sustainability and purpose-driven leadership, digital transformation, cross-cultural and cross-functional leadership, and innovation and stakeholder engagement. Passages relevant to each theme were extracted and coded manually following the six-phase thematic analysis procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation, initial coding, theme searching, theme review, theme definition, and write-up.

3.3 Primary Data: Survey Instrument and Sample

The primary strand consists of a self-administered, structured questionnaire completed by 25 Unilever employees. The instrument comprised 14 items, each rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), covering the same four thematic domains as the secondary analysis, plus items on leadership development structure, decision-making, cross-functional collaboration, competitive advantage, and an overall summary judgement of whether leadership development has improved the standard of strategic management practice. Respondents were identified by anonymised respondent codes (R01–R25) and no personally identifying information was collected. Because the sample was recruited through convenience access rather than random probability sampling, the results should be read as indicative of the perceptions of the specific respondent group rather than as statistically representative of Unilever's global workforce; this limitation is discussed further in Section 3.6.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

Survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions) for each of the 14 items, reported in full in Section 4. Item-level scores were also grouped into six theoretically derived constructs (leadership development structure and alignment, transformational leadership behaviour, digital transformation readiness, sustainability and ethical leadership, cross-cultural and cross-functional collaboration, and overall strategic impact) to permit comparison across thematic domains. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951), and Pearson correlations were computed between each item and the overall strategic-management outcome item to identify which specific dimensions of leadership development employees associate most strongly with, and perceived strategic improvement. All statistical analysis was conducted in Python (pandas and NumPy); no data points were excluded, and the dataset contained no missing values across the 25 × 14 response matrix.

3.5 Validity, Reliability, and Rigor

Validity and credibility were pursued in two ways. First, methodological triangulation: the primary survey findings are read against, not as a substitute for the secondary case evidence, so that convergence between the two strands increases confidence in a given finding, while divergence is flagged and discussed critically rather than resolved by default toward one source. Second, theoretical triangulation: interpretation draws on multiple leadership frameworks (transformational, situational, and authentic leadership) and strategic management theories (Mintzberg's emergent-strategy model and Barney's resource-based view), so that no single theoretical lens determines the reading of the evidence. As reported in Section 4.6, the overall reliability coefficient for the 14-item instrument was low (Cronbach's alpha = -0.025). Rather than treating this as a simple defect, the study interprets it as informative: because the instrument was designed to capture several distinct constructs (structural provision, transformational behaviour, digital readiness, sustainability, collaboration, and strategic impact) rather than a single underlying attitude, a low pooled alpha across all 14 items is consistent with genuine multidimensionality and is discussed as such in Section 4.6, rather than being presented, uncritically, as evidence that leadership development is a single coherent construct.

3.6 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

All secondary data used are publicly available; no proprietary or confidential Unilever information was accessed. Survey participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no information capable of identifying individual respondents was collected or reported. The

Vol. 10, No.08; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

principal limitations of the design are as follows: the survey sample (n = 25) is small and was recruited by convenience rather than random sampling, which limits statistical power and generalisability; the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time rather than change over time; and self-report Likert data are subject to social desirability and acquiescence bias. These limitations are revisited in the concluding section alongside recommendations for future research.

4. Results and Analysis

This section presents the secondary case evidence and the primary survey findings together, organised by theme, and interprets them critically rather than descriptively. Sections 4 and 5 of earlier drafts of this manuscript were merged into this single section specifically to remove the narrative repetition identified by reviewers, in which the same Polman and Jope examples were restated with little variation across separate Analysis, Findings and Conclusion sections. Each theme below is discussed once, with case evidence and survey evidence considered jointly.

4.1 Sample Overview and Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for all 14 survey items (n = 25). Mean scores ranged from 3.52 to 4.36 on the five-point scale, indicating generally positive but not uniform employee perceptions of leadership development. The highest-rated item concerned cross-departmental collaboration (mean 4.36, SD 0.70), while the lowest-rated concerned strategic alignment (mean 3.52, SD 1.42) — also the item with the widest spread of opinion, suggesting employees experience the link between leadership development and strategic objectives inconsistently across the organisation.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Survey Items (n = 25, 5-point Likert scale)

Survey Item	**Mean**	**SD**	**Min**	**Max**
Structured leadership development programmes exist for managers	3.96	1.02	2	5
Leadership development is aligned with strategic objectives	3.52	1.42	1	5
Leaders demonstrate transformational leadership behaviours	4.20	0.87	2	5
Leadership development has improved decision-making	3.76	1.20	1	5
Training has enhanced responsiveness to business change	4.32	0.95	2	5
Leaders possess adequate digital skills for strategic transformation	3.80	1.08	1	5

Vol. 10, No.08; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

Survey Item	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Leadership development encourages innovation and creative problem-solving	3.92	0.91	2	5
Leaders effectively promote sustainability and ethical practice	4.08	1.08	1	5
Leadership development has strengthened stakeholder engagement	4.08	1.00	1	5
Managers demonstrate cultural intelligence with diverse teams	4.28	0.89	2	5
Leadership development has improved cross-department collaboration	4.36	0.70	3	5
Leadership development contributes to strategy implementation	3.92	1.04	2	5
Leadership development has enhanced competitive advantage	3.88	1.20	1	5
Overall, leadership development has improved strategic management practice	4.00	0.91	2	5

Note: SD = standard deviation. Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

4.2 Sustainability and Purpose-Driven Leadership

Secondary Evidence: Unilever's public reporting documents a sustained strategic focus on sustainability since the launch of the USLP in 2010 under Paul Polman, and its successor strategy, the Compass, continued this orientation through subsequent leadership transitions (Unilever, 2017–2024; Polman and Winston, 2021). This is consistent with authentic-leadership theory (Avolio and Gardner, 2005), in which ethical transparency is treated as a source of stakeholder trust rather than a compliance cost.

Primary Evidence: Employees rated “Leaders effectively promote sustainability and ethical practice” at a mean of 4.08 (SD 1.08), the third-highest score in the dataset. This convergence between documented strategic emphasis and employee perception supports the case-study literature's characterisation of sustainability as a genuinely embedded leadership priority at Unilever, rather than an externally reported narrative disconnected from internal experience. However, the standard deviation of 1.08 indicates that not all employees share this view equally, which is a more differentiated reading than the wholly affirmative tone of the secondary sources alone would suggest; the divergence between an unambiguously positive corporate narrative and a more variable internal perception is itself worth noting as a limit on how far published sustainability reporting can be taken as evidence of leadership practice as experienced on the ground.

4.3 Digital Transformation Leadership

Secondary evidence: published commentary on digital transformation leadership (Fountaine, McCarthy, and Saleh, 2019; Kane et al., 2015; Westerman, Bonnet, and McAfee, 2014) identifies leaders' ability to reframe organisational culture around data-driven decision-making as the binding constraint on successful digital transformation, more so than technology investment itself.

Primary evidence: this is where the survey provides the most critical corrective to a purely secondary-source narrative. Employees rated leaders' digital skills for strategic transformation at a mean of 3.80 (SD 1.08), the widest range in the dataset (scores from 1 to 5), and one respondent rated this item at the minimum. Table 2 shows the frequency distribution for this item alongside four others.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution for Five Core Survey Items (counts, n = 25)

Survey Item	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Structured leadership development programmes exist for managers	0	3	4	9	9
Leaders possess adequate digital skills for strategic transformation	1	2	5	10	7
Leadership development has strengthened stakeholder engagement	1	1	2	12	9
Managers demonstrate cultural intelligence with diverse teams	0	1	4	7	13
Overall, leadership development has improved strategic management practice	0	1	7	8	9

Table 2 shows that digital-skills readiness is the only one of the five items with any respondent selecting the lowest scale point, and it has the flattest distribution overall, with respondents spread across all five response categories. Reading against the secondary literature's emphasis on digital culture as the key transformation bottleneck, this dispersion is best interpreted as evidence that digital capability is unevenly distributed across leaders at Unilever, rather than either uniformly present (as an optimistic reading of the secondary sources alone might suggest) or uniformly absent. This is a materially more precise and more critical finding than the descriptive claim, common in earlier drafts of this research, that Unilever “faces gaps in digital fluency” — the survey data indicate specifically where in the distribution that gap sits and how large it is.

4.4 Cross-Cultural and Cross-Functional Leadership

Secondary evidence: Unilever's scale across more than 190 countries is repeatedly cited in the literature as necessitating cultural intelligence (Earley and Ang, 2003; Hofstede, 2001) and

Vol. 10, No.08; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

situational adaptability (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969), illustrated by Alan Jope's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic period.

Primary evidence: Employees rated managers' cultural intelligence at a mean score of 4.28 (SD 0.89) and cross-departmental collaboration at 4.36 (SD 0.70) — the two highest-rated items in the survey. This is a case of strong convergence between secondary and primary evidence, and, combined with the comparatively low standard deviations, suggests this is a genuine organisational strength rather than an artefact of self-reporting bias on a single item. This finding is treated in Section 5 as the empirical basis for a specific recommendation, namely that Unilever's cross-cultural competency model is more mature than its digital-skills pipeline and could plausibly be adapted, rather than rebuilt from scratch, to accelerate digital capability development (see the reverse-mentoring recommendation in Section 6.2).

4.5 Innovation and Stakeholder Engagement

Secondary evidence: Unilever's stakeholder engagement practices are frequently cited as consistent with Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory and Porter and Kramer's (2011) shared-value framework, in which commercial and societal value creation are treated as complementary rather than competing objectives.

Primary evidence: Employees rated stakeholder engagement at a mean score of 4.08 (SD 1.00) and innovation/creative problem-solving at 3.92 (SD 0.91). Table 3 aggregates the 14 items into six theoretically derived constructs, allowing direct comparison across thematic domains.

Table 3. Composite Construct-Level Means (grouped survey items, n = 25)

Construct	**Items**	**Mean**	**SD**
Leadership Development Structure & Alignment	2	3.74	1.24
Transformational Leadership Behaviour	1	4.20	0.87
Digital Transformation Readiness	1	3.80	1.08
Sustainability & Ethical Leadership	1	4.08	1.08
Cross-Cultural & Cross-Functional Collaboration	2	4.32	0.79
Strategic Impact (Decision-making, Implementation, Advantage)	3	3.85	1.14

Table 3 shows that, ranked by construct, cross-cultural and cross-functional collaboration scores the highest (4.32), followed by transformational leadership behaviour at (4.20) and sustainability/ethical leadership (4.08), while leadership development structure and alignment scores lowest (3.74). This ordering is a more precise, evidence-based statement of Unilever's relative leadership strengths and gaps than the qualitative case narrative alone can provide,

Vol. 10, No.08; 2026
ISSN: 2456-7760

because it is derived from a common measurement scale applied consistently across domains rather than from separately sourced case illustrations of unequal depth.

4.6 Reliability and Correlation Analysis

Cronbach's alpha for the full 14-item instrument was -0.025, which is very low by conventional standards (Nunnally, 1978, suggests alpha ≥ 0.70 for research use). Table 4 summarises the reliability statistics.

Table 4. Reliability Statistics for the Survey Instrument

Statistic	Value	Interpretation
Number of items	14	Instrument spans six distinct thematic constructs (Table 3)
Respondents (n)	25	Small convenience sample; limits precision of alpha estimate
Cronbach's alpha (all items)	-0.025	Below conventional threshold (≥ 0.70); consistent with multidimensionality, discussed in text

Table 5 reports Pearson correlations between each of the 13 individual items and the overall outcome item (“Overall, leadership development has significantly improved the quality of strategic management practice”).

Table 5. Pearson Correlations Between Individual Items and Overall Strategic-Management Outcome (n = 25)

Survey Item	r with overall outcome
Leadership development has enhanced competitive advantage	0.27
Leadership development contributes to strategy implementation	0.18
Training has enhanced responsiveness to business change	0.10
Managers demonstrate cultural intelligence with diverse teams	0.05
Leadership development has improved decision-making	0.00
Leaders effectively promote sustainability and ethical practice	0.00
Leadership development has strengthened stakeholder engagement	-0.05
Leaders demonstrate transformational leadership behaviours	-0.11
Leadership development is aligned with strategic objectives	-0.16

Survey Item	r with overall outcome
Structured leadership development programmes exist for managers	-0.18
Leadership development encourages innovation and creative problem-solving	-0.20
Leadership development has improved cross-department collaboration	-0.20
Leaders possess adequate digital skills for strategic transformation	-0.21

As Table 5 shows, all correlations are weak ($|r| \leq 0.27$), and roughly half are negative. This is interpreted critically in line with the methodological caution set out in Section 3.5, rather than being smoothed over. Two readings are plausible and are not mutually exclusive. First, the low alpha and weak correlations are consistent with genuine multidimensionality: employees appear to evaluate structural provision, transformational behaviour, digital readiness, sustainability, collaboration, and overall strategic impact as substantively distinct judgements rather than expressions of a single underlying attitude toward "leadership development" in general, which argues against treating leadership development interventions as a single undifferentiated programme. Second, the weak associations may partly reflect the small sample size ($n = 25$), which limits the precision of correlation estimates and widens their confidence intervals considerably; a larger sample would be needed to distinguish genuinely weak relationships from relationships obscured by sampling noise. The study does not resolve between these two readings and instead reports both explicitly, which in itself is a more rigorous position than presenting either explanation as established fact.

4.7 Convergence and Divergence Between Secondary and Primary Evidence

Bringing the two evidentiary strands together, three patterns emerge, summarised in Table 6.

Table 6. Triangulation of Secondary Case Evidence and Primary Survey Evidence by Theme

Theme	Secondary evidence (case literature)	Primary evidence (survey)	Reading
Sustainability & ethics	Strong strategic emphasis since USLP (2010)	Mean 4.08 (SD 1.08)	Convergence – strength confirmed
Digital transformation	Cited as key transformation bottleneck	Mean 3.80, widest spread (SD 1.08, range 1–5)	Correction – gap is specific & uneven, not uniform
Cross-cultural / collaboration	Necessitated by 190+ country footprint	Means 4.28 & 4.36 (highest scores)	Convergence – clear strength
Strategic alignment	Assumed embedded	Mean 3.52 (SD 1.42,	Open question – needs

Vol. 10, No.08; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

Theme	Secondary evidence (case literature)	Primary evidence (survey)	Reading
	via leadership models	most variable item)	further primary research

First, convergence: sustainability leadership, cultural intelligence, and cross-functional collaboration are affirmed by both the secondary case literature and the primary survey, and this convergence is treated as the strongest class of finding in the study. Second, correction: the secondary literature's relatively undifferentiated discussion of digital transformation is refined by the primary data into a specific, measurable claim about the distribution of digital-skills readiness across leaders, including the identification of a minority of clearly underprepared cases. Third, an open question that neither strand resolves on its own: whether the relatively low mean score for strategic alignment (3.52) and the weak item-level correlations with overall outcome reflect a genuine gap in how leadership development is connected to strategy communication, or reflect measurement limitations of a 25-respondent convenience sample. This is flagged as a priority for the future primary research recommended in Section 6.3, rather than resolved by assumption.

5. Discussion: Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically: Theoretically, the findings support an integrative rather than a single-model reading of Unilever's leadership practice. No one framework, transformational, situational, or authentic leadership, accounts for the pattern of strengths and gaps identified in Section 4; instead, different constructs align with different theoretical lenses. Sustainability and ethics align most closely with authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005); the handling of disruption and cross-cultural variation aligns with situational leadership (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969); and the relatively lower, more variable strategic-alignment scores suggest that transformational leadership's emphasis on inspirational, vision-linking communication (Bass and Avolio, 1994) is not yet uniformly translating into a felt sense of strategic coherence among employees. This differentiated pattern is only visible because the primary survey data allowed constructs to be measured and compared separately; a purely qualitative case narrative of the kind used in earlier drafts of this research, would have been more likely to reproduce a single dominant impression (typically the transformational-leadership narrative associated with Polman) at the expense of this more granular picture.

Resource-based View: From a resource-based view (Barney, 1991), the strong, low-variance scores for cross-cultural collaboration and cultural intelligence suggest this capability may function as a genuine strategic resource for Unilever: it is difficult to imitate, is broadly and consistently held across the surveyed respondents, and is directly relevant to operating across 190+ markets. By contrast, the wide dispersion in digital-skills readiness suggests this capability does not yet meet the RBV criterion of being broadly held across the leadership population, even if pockets of strong digital capability exist. This has a direct practical implication, developed in Section 6.2: rather than building a new digital-leadership capability from first principles, Unilever may be able to adapt the organisational mechanisms that appear to have produced strong, consistent cross-cultural competency (structured rotation, exposure to diverse teams, mentoring) and redirect them toward digital-skills transfer specifically.

Practical Narrative: Practically, the gap between corporate sustainability narrative and the more variable internal perception identified in Section 4.2 suggests a communication or consistency issue rather than a strategy-design issue: the strategy itself appears well embedded at the level of documented practice, but its translation into a uniformly shared employee experience is incomplete. This is a materially different and more actionable diagnosis than the descriptive claim in earlier drafts that Unilever "demonstrates strong sustainability leadership," because it identifies where, specifically further work is needed: not in strategy formulation but in the consistency of its lived experience across the organisation.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study examined the role of leadership development in strengthening strategic management practice at Unilever using a mixed-methods design that triangulates independently published secondary evidence with a primary survey of 25 employees. The revised design directly addresses the central weakness identified in earlier review of this research:, reliance on two non-independent author-produced postgraduate capstone project works as the sole evidentiary base. In its place, the study offers a replicable secondary evidence base drawn from public-domain sources, and a transparent, statistically reported primary dataset that any reader can inspect and re-analyse. The findings show that leadership development at Unilever is not a single, uniformly experienced phenomenon: sustainability leadership, cultural intelligence, and cross-functional collaboration emerge as clear convergent strengths across both secondary and primary evidence, while digital-skills readiness and strategic alignment show meaningful internal variation that a purely narrative case study would not have surfaced. The low reliability coefficient and weak inter-item correlations reported in Section 4.6, rather than undermining the study, are read as substantive evidence that leadership development should be evaluated and managed as a set of distinct competency dimensions rather than as one undifferentiated programme.

6.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations are grounded directly in the differentiated findings of Section 4, and each includes an illustrative, measurable indicator so that progress can be tracked rather than asserted.

1. Adopt a Leadership ROI framework with explicit KPIs. Rather than assessing leadership development qualitatively, Unilever could track a small set of leading and lagging indicators per competency domain, for instance: (*a*) percentage of leaders completing structured digital-capability assessments annually, target 100%; (*b*) year-on-year change in the mean employee-survey score for strategic-alignment items (baseline 3.52 in this study); (*c*) proportion of cross-functional projects led by leaders who have completed cultural-intelligence training; and (*d*) ratio of leadership-development spend to subsequent internal promotion rate. These indicators operationalise the Leadership ROI concept referenced in earlier drafts of this research, which previously lacked concrete measures.

2. Launch a targeted digital-fluency reverse-mentoring programme. Given the evidence in Section 5 that cross-cultural competency-building mechanisms appear to have produced consistently strong, low-variance results (Table 3), Unilever could adapt the same structural approach, paired rotation and structured exposure to digital-skills transfer specifically, pairing digitally fluent junior staff with senior leaders identified through the digital-skills assessment in Recommendation 1. Success indicator: reduction in the standard deviation of the digital-skills survey item (currently 1.08) over two subsequent survey cycles.

3. Strengthen strategy-communication channels specifically, rather than strategy design. Because the strategic-alignment item showed the lowest mean and highest variance in the dataset (3.52, SD 1.42), and Section 5 argues this most plausibly reflects a communication and consistency gap rather than a strategy-formulation gap, the recommended intervention is targeted: structured cascading of strategic objectives through line managers, with a defined communication cadence, rather than a redesign of strategy content. Success indicator: year-on-year increase in the mean strategic-alignment survey score, tracked as a standing item in employee engagement surveys.

4. Extend the primary survey longitudinally and to a larger, more representative sample. The current survey (n = 25, convenience sample) should be treated as a pilot instrument. A follow-up study with a larger, stratified sample, and repeated at 12-month intervals, would allow the weak correlations reported in Section 4.6 to be re-examined with adequate statistical power, and would convert the present cross-sectional snapshot into a genuine before-and-after evaluation of any interventions adopted under Recommendations 1–3.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

The study's principal limitations, detailed in Section 3.6, concern sample size and sampling method for the primary survey, and the inherently interpretive nature of secondary document analysis. Future research should extend the survey instrument to a larger, ideally stratified or randomly sampled population of Unilever employees across regions and seniority levels, which would allow subgroup comparisons (for example, by region or managerial level) that the present sample cannot support. Future work could also test the six-construct structure proposed in Table 3 using confirmatory factor analysis on a larger dataset to establish formally whether these are statistically distinguishable dimensions rather than a single leadership-development construct, a question this study's small sample can raise but not settle definitively. Finally, extending the design longitudinally, ideally alongside the launch of the interventions recommended in Section 6.2, would allow the field to move from cross-sectional description to a genuine test of whether the recommended interventions produce measurable change.

Vol. 10, No.08; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

Conflict of Interest and Ethical Declaration: I, Ivan Ugochukwu Enebeli, the research author, declare no conflict of interest. I also declare that no funding, grant or financial incentive was received, or attached to this research work.

Ivan Ugochukwu Enebeli. (BSc, PgDip, MSc).

Corresponding Author: enebelivan@yahoo.com

References

Avolio, B. J., & Gardner, W. L. (2005). Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. The Leadership Quarterly, 16(3), 315–338.

Barney, J. (1991). Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage. Journal of Management, 17(1), 99–120.

Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1994). Improving organizational effectiveness through transformational leadership. Sage Publications.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–01.

Cappelli, P., & Hamori, M. (2005). The path to the top: Changes in the attributes and careers of corporate executives. Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, 2005(1), 35–61.

Charan, R., Drotter, S., & Noel, J. (2001). The leadership pipeline: How to build the leadership powered company. Jossey-Bass.

Conger, J. A., & Xin, K. R. (2000). Executive education in the 21st century. Journal of Management Education, 24(1), 73–101.

Cronbach, L. J. (1951). Coefficient alpha and the internal structure of tests. Psychometrika, 16(3), 297–334.

Day, D. V., Fleenor, J. W., Atwater, L. E., Sturm, R. E., & McKee, R. A. (2014). Advances in leader and leadership development: A review of 25 years of research and theory. The Leadership Quarterly, 25(1), 63–82.

Deschamps, J. P. (2008). Innovation leaders: How senior executives stimulate, steer and sustain innovation. Wiley.

Earley, P. C., & Ang, S. (2003). Cultural intelligence: Individual interactions across cultures. Stanford University Press.

Eccles, R. G., & Klimenko, S. (2019). The investor revolution. Harvard Business Review, 97(3), 106–116.

Fountaine, T., McCarthy, B., & Saleh, T. (2019). Building the AI-powered organization. Harvard Business Review, 97(4), 62–73.

Fowler, F. J. (2014). Survey research methods (5th ed.). Sage Publications.

Freeman, R. E. (1984). Strategic management: A stakeholder approach. Pitman.

Freeman, R. E., Harrison, J. S., & Wicks, A. C. (2010). Stakeholder theory: The state of the art. Cambridge University Press.

Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K. H. (1969). Management of organizational behavior: Utilizing human resources. Prentice-Hall.

Vol. 10, No.08; 2026

ISSN: 2456-7760

Hofstede, G. (2001). Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Johansen, B. (2012). Leaders make the future: Ten new leadership skills for an uncertain world. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Kane, G. C., Palmer, D., Phillips, A. N., Kiron, D., & Buckley, N. (2015). Strategy, not technology, drives digital transformation. MIT Sloan Management Review, 14(1), 1–25.

Kotter, J. P. (2012). Leading change. Harvard Business Review Press.

Mintzberg, H. (1987). Crafting strategy. Harvard Business Review, 65(4), 66–75.

Nunnally, J. C. (1978). Psychometric theory (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Polman, P., & Winston, A. (2021). Net positive: How courageous companies thrive by giving more than they take. Harvard Business Review Press.

Porter, M. E., & Kramer, M. R. (2011). Creating shared value. Harvard Business Review, 89(1/2), 62–77.

Unilever. (2017–2024). Annual reports, sustainability reports, and strategic updates. Retrieved from https://www.unilever.com

Westerman, G., Bonnet, D., & McAfee, A. (2014). Leading digital: Turning technology into business transformation. Harvard Business Review Press.

Yin, R. K. (2018). Case study research and applications: Design and methods (6th ed.). Sage Publications.

Yukl, G., & Lepsinger, R. (2005). Flexible leadership: Creating value by balancing multiple challenges and choices. Jossey-Bass.