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STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

WHEN LANGUAGE BECOMES STRATEGY

Why multilingual capability has become part of organisational performance

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Executive overview

In many international organisations, the issue is no longer a shortage of information. It is the failure to convert available knowledge into coordinated action. Critical expertise is misunderstood, diluted or arrives too late to shape the decision. The practical problem is therefore not communication volume, but knowledge integration: turning expertise held in different locations, languages and functions into one usable basis for decision and execution.

Language affects that process, but it is not a stand-alone explanation for poor performance. Weak governance, misaligned incentives, hierarchy and low psychological safety can all block knowledge. Language matters because it can amplify those weaknesses or help overcome them. It influences who participates, whose expertise carries authority and whether local insight survives the journey through the organisation. A common corporate language and better translation technology reduce friction, but neither guarantees shared understanding. Multilingual capability therefore belongs in the design of work, leadership, talent and professional education—not only in language training.

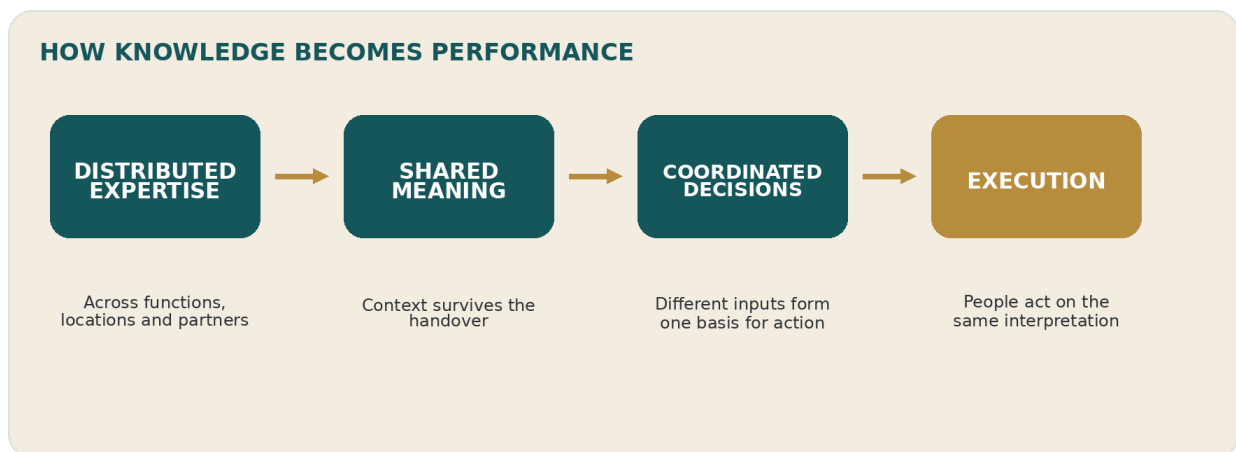


Figure 1. The management challenge is not access to information, but the conversion of distributed expertise into coordinated action.

Execution drifts when meaning fragments

A strategy is approved at headquarters. The objectives appear clear and the people involved are capable. Yet execution begins to drift. Regions interpret priorities differently, meetings end with apparent agreement while implementation reveals conflicting assumptions, and valuable local experience never reaches those making the final decision. These failures are often labelled complexity, weak alignment or poor communication. The usual response is more reporting, more meetings and more messages. That may increase activity without correcting the underlying problem: different parts of the organisation are acting on different meanings.

The cause is structural. Expertise is no longer concentrated in one place. Product knowledge may sit in Germany, supplier insight in Vietnam, software capability in India and customer knowledge in several local markets. Digital platforms make information easier to exchange, but they do not make it coherent. Someone still has to connect technical vocabularies, commercial priorities and local assumptions. The bottleneck has shifted from access to information to the ability to build a shared basis for action before a decision is made.

What language does—and does not—explain

Language is one mechanism through which dispersed expertise becomes usable. Knowledge moves through conversations, reports, negotiations, meetings and informal networks; at each stage, meaning can be clarified, simplified or lost. Research on multinational teams shows that visible language barriers can reduce participation, while hidden barriers can impair sensemaking even when people appear fluent. A shared working language may therefore enable communication without producing a shared interpretation.

Language is rarely the sole cause of failure. A poorly governed organisation will not become effective because its employees speak more languages, and a psychologically unsafe team will not challenge bad decisions simply because translation improves. The stronger conclusion is more practical: language shapes the transmission of knowledge inside the structures leaders have created. Where authority is concentrated, incentives discourage challenge or decisions are rushed, linguistic differences can deepen the resulting blind spots. Where governance is clear and challenge is legitimate, multilingual capability can broaden the knowledge available to a decision.

This is why fluency must not be confused with contribution. Linguistic confidence influences who speaks first, who can challenge a senior colleague without hesitation and whose argument sounds authoritative. Recent evidence also links fluency in the official corporate language with peer-granted status and informal influence in multinational teams. The risk is operational: the organisation may possess the right expertise and still fail to hear it in time.

DECISION RISK

The organisation may possess the right knowledge and still fail to hear it. Fluency shapes visibility; it should never become a proxy for judgement.

AI removes friction, not responsibility

Generative AI and real-time translation will make cross-language communication faster, cheaper and more accessible, particularly for routine exchanges. They do not remove the harder management problem. Translation alone does not ensure that intent, status, hesitation or the assumptions behind a recommendation are understood correctly. A technically accurate sentence can still carry the wrong organisational meaning.

The appropriate response is neither scepticism nor blind trust. AI should reduce mechanical friction; accountable people must still verify context and understanding. In high-risk decisions, fluent output should never be treated as proof that everyone has interpreted the underlying issue in the same way. As translation becomes easier, contextual judgement becomes more valuable—not because technology is weak, but because the remaining problems are increasingly social, organisational and strategic.

PRACTICAL RULE

Use AI to lower the mechanical cost of communication. Keep accountable human ownership for context, interpretation and high-risk decisions.

Leadership, culture and HR control different levers

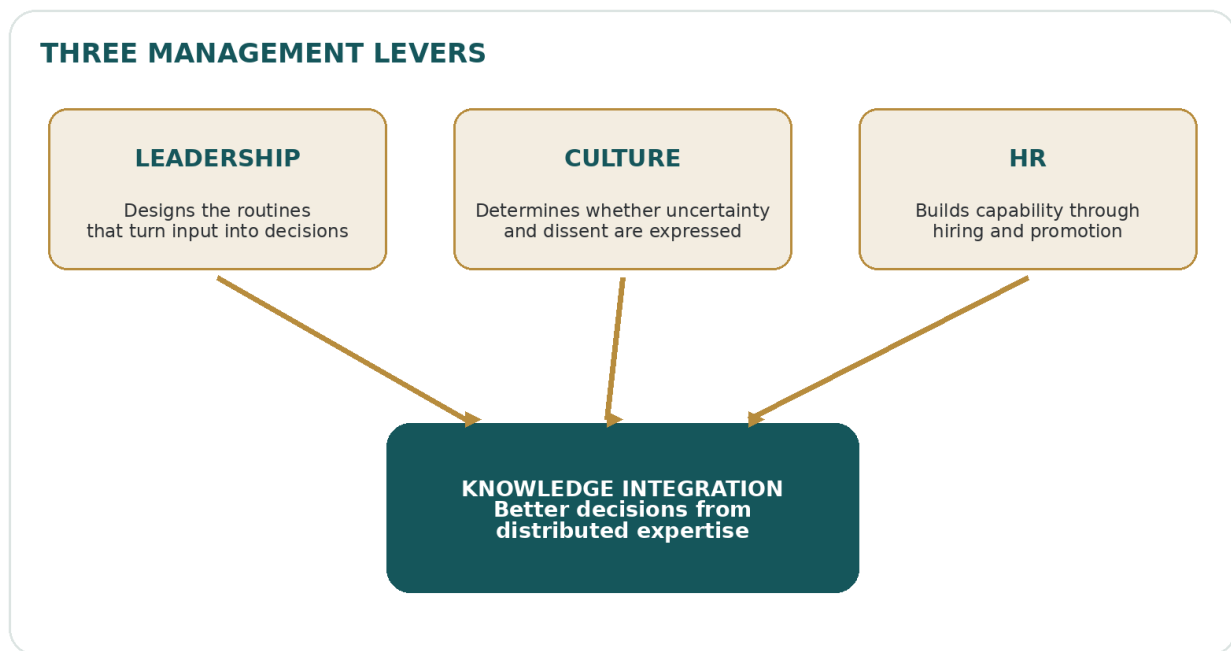


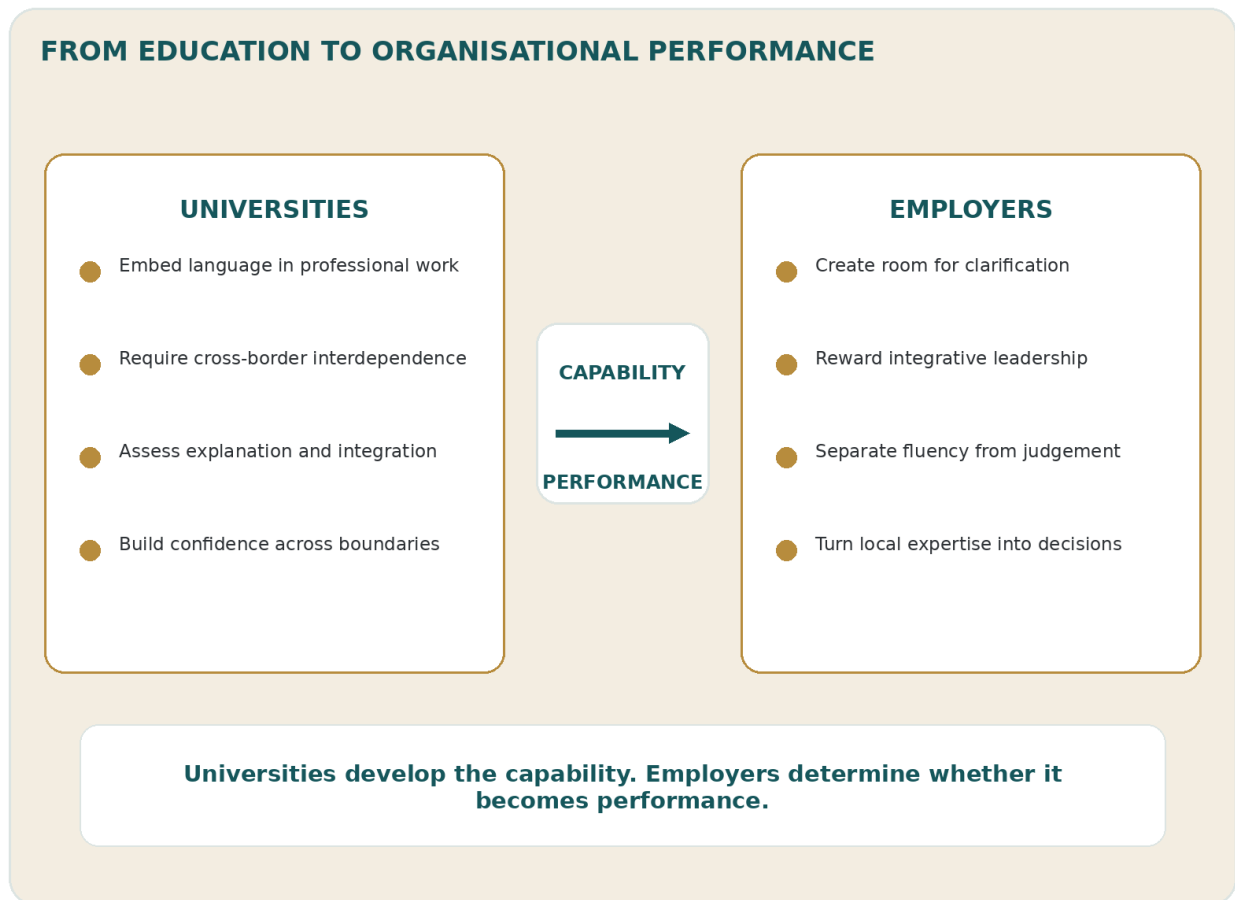
Figure 2. Three management levers determine whether multilingual capability becomes organisational performance.

Leadership determines the routines through which knowledge becomes a decision. Critical questions must reach local and technical teams early enough for a substantive contribution. Meetings should expose assumptions rather than merely record agreement, and important decisions should be restated in operational terms before execution begins. This is not a communication exercise. It is decision governance.

Culture determines whether people use those routines honestly. Employees must be able to admit uncertainty, ask for clarification and challenge a polished but incomplete argument without losing status. Where speed is rewarded more than comprehension, people will pretend to understand. Where fluency is associated with authority, knowledge will be filtered through those who communicate most comfortably rather than those who know most.

HR determines whether the capability compounds over time. Formal proficiency remains relevant, but it is insufficient. Recruitment, leadership assessment and succession planning should also test whether people can connect local and global perspectives, explain specialist knowledge across functions and facilitate difficult conversations. The most valuable multilingual employees are not simply fluent. They are integrators who make other people's expertise usable.

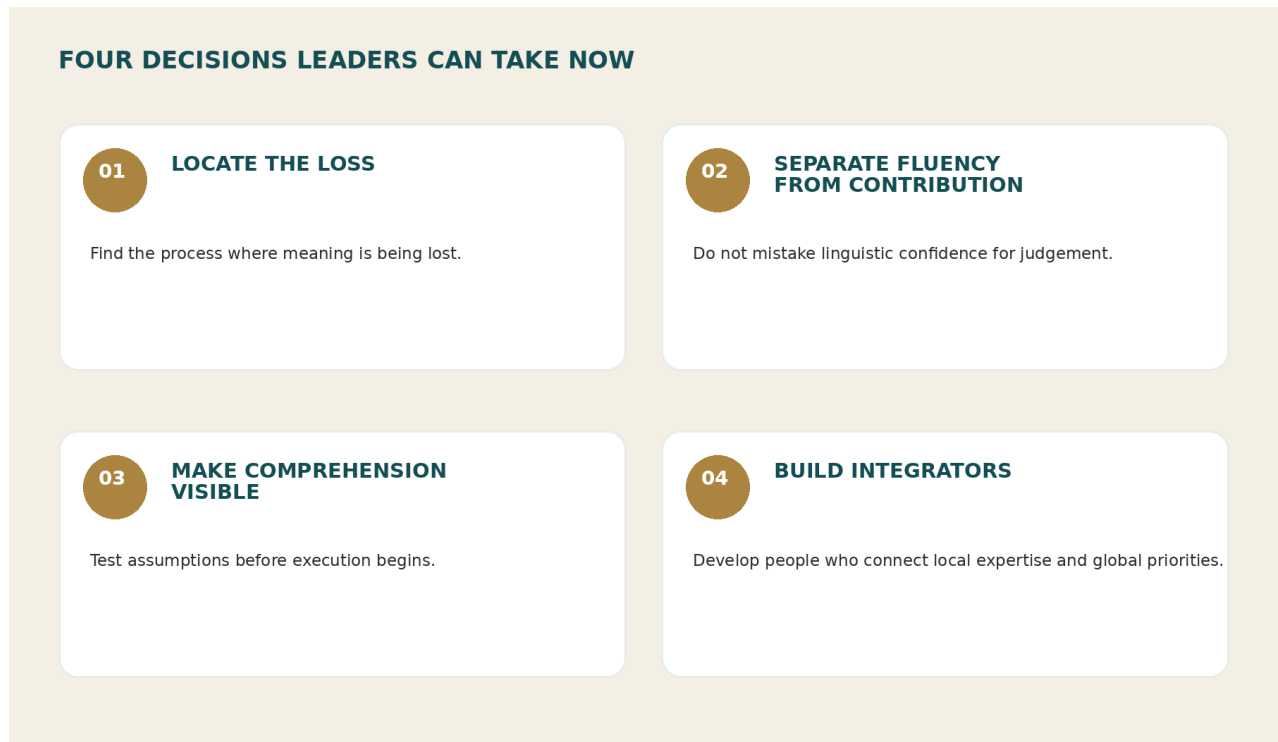
Universities develop the capability; employers turn it into performance



The capability must begin developing before people enter leadership pipelines. European labour-market evidence confirms substantial demand for language skills, but employers need more than graduates who can work in English or present fluently. They need engineers who can explain trade-offs to non-engineers, managers who can negotiate across different institutional assumptions and professionals who can recognise when apparent agreement hides divergent interpretations.

That changes the purpose of multilingual education. Language learning creates the most value when embedded in professional work. Cross-border projects should require genuine interdependence rather than simply placing diverse students in the same group. Assessment should test whether students can clarify ambiguity, integrate different forms of expertise and communicate a decision to people who do not share the same technical or cultural frame. The aim is not more language teaching as such, but stronger preparation for knowledge-intensive, international work.

Four decisions leaders can take now



1. Locate the process where meaning is being lost

Examine product development, supplier management, regional execution, transformation programmes, post-merger integration and customer escalation. Begin where misunderstanding creates measurable cost, delay or risk—not with a generic training programme.

2. Separate fluency from contribution

Review whether important meetings, talent processes and leadership discussions systematically favour linguistic confidence over relevant expertise. Where they do, redesign participation rather than expecting less fluent employees simply to speak more.

3. Make comprehension visible

Pre-circulate critical questions, record the assumptions behind decisions, ask teams to translate implications into their own operating context and distinguish formal agreement from genuine understanding.

4. Build integrators

Recruit and develop people who can connect local knowledge, specialist expertise and global priorities. These individuals often create more value than another reporting layer because they improve the quality and speed with which the organisation acts on what it already knows.

A five-question diagnostic

✓	At which handovers do decisions change meaning between headquarters, regions and operating teams?
✓	Which people hold relevant local or technical expertise but contribute least in critical discussions?
✓	Where is apparent agreement repeatedly contradicted by execution?
✓	Which high-risk processes rely on translated output without contextual human verification?
✓	Do leadership and succession criteria assess the ability to integrate knowledge across linguistic and cultural boundaries?

The bottom line

International organisations do not compete simply by possessing knowledge. They compete by turning dispersed expertise into coordinated action faster and more accurately than others. Language is not a substitute for sound governance, trust or clear accountability. It becomes strategic when it determines whether critical knowledge can cross those structures with its meaning intact—and influence the decision before it is too late.