

Effective Leadership among Expatriate Managers in Africa: Challenges and Strategic Responses

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Abstract

Expatriate assignment failure is a multidimensional phenomenon resulting from the interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual factors; some researchers estimate that 40% of all expatriate assignments fail (Robbins & Judge, 2023; Atay et al., 2024).

Purpose–*The purpose of the study is to identify individual-level and organizational-level challenges that are likely to be barriers to effective leadership among expatriate managers in Africa and to provide strategic responses that multinational corporations can adopt to overcome these challenges and improve the prospects of effective leadership among expatriate managers in Africa.*

Design/Methodology–*This paper is based on a review of relevant theories, empirical research findings, and reports from the existing literature.*

Findings–*This study identified the following challenges that are likely to be barriers to effective leadership of expatriate managers in Africa at an individual level: cross-cultural adjustment problems, culture shock, language barriers, psychological stress, limited cultural intelligence, lack of interpersonal competence, and role ambiguity. Poor preparation of expatriates, weak organizational support, poor knowledge management, unclear roles, poor communication, unsupportive organizational cultures, and lack of leadership development at the organizational level may hinder assignment success. This study has further developed an integrated theoretical framework of cross-cultural adjustment, cultural intelligence, servant leadership, transformational leadership, adaptive leadership, social learning theory, social exchange theory, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, and the African philosophy of Ubuntu to address the expatriate leadership challenges and improve assignment success.*

Practical implications–*This study provides policymakers and multinational corporation leaders, current and future expatriate managers, and HR managers with the best ways of identifying challenges at the individual level and organizational level that are likely to act as barriers to effective leadership among expatriate managers in Africa and adopt strategic responses to address these challenges and enhance the likelihood of successful expatriate assignments in Africa*

Key Terms: *Expatriate Managers, Expatriate Leadership, Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Organizational Support, Social Support.*

1.0.1 Introduction

Many African countries have adopted the attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI) as a strategic goal. This is because FDI accelerates economic transformation, builds productive capacity, creates jobs, and meets the aspirations of the African Union's Agenda 2063. Sub-Saharan Africa is of increasing interest to multinational enterprises (MNEs) due to the presence of underutilized resources, low-cost labor and emerging consumer markets (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2018; Economist, 2019). Hence, the region has become more attractive to MNEs (Ewalefoh, 2022; Osabutey & Jackson, 2019; Yakovleva & Vazquez-Brust, 2018, in Nkrumah et al., 2024).

Expatriates are often assigned to key managerial and technical positions in the early phase of setting up overseas subsidiaries, and administrative skills are concentrated on this group (Goerzen & Beamish, 2007; Tan & Mahoney, 2006). The administrative skills of local staff joining the subsidiary differ over time (Goerzen & Beamish, 2007; Tan & Mahoney, 2006, in Riaz et al., 2014). Expatriates are employees and managers who are sent by their organizations to work abroad for long periods of time, usually more than one year (Lee et al., 2019; Frith, 1981).

Expatriates have many important roles such as:

- Implement operational standards and global strategies

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- Sharing the culture and values of the organization
- Developing the knowledge and skills of host country employees (Bennett, Aston & Colquhoun, 2000, in Lee et al., 2019)
- Enable knowledge transfer from headquarters to subsidiaries (Berry, 2017; Chang et al., 2012; Harzing et al., 2016; Kawai & Chung, 2019)
- Providing local business opportunities to headquarters (Plourde et al, 2014)
- Building informal networks for better coordination within MNCs (Belderbos & Heijltjes, 2005; Belderbos et al., 2014; Ge et al., 2019)
- Playing key roles in connecting headquarters and host-country subsidiaries through transfer of organizational culture, managerial skills, technological knowledge, and strategic guidance (Paik & Sohn, 2004)

Due to rising competition in the world, there is a growing need for expat leaders to perform effectively in different countries (AlMazrouei & Zacca, 2015). The effectiveness of expatriate leaders starts with an awareness of the importance of adapting to the culture where they work (Deng & Gibson, 2009, cited in AlMazrouei & Zacca, 2015). Different cultures have different leadership styles and no one style is effective for all cultures (AlMazrouei & Zacca, 2015). Every profession or field has different cultural norms for different groups. This is why expatriate leaders' behavior in a new country may be misunderstood by employees who are used to different cultural norms (Cox et al., 1991, as cited in Lituchy et al., 2017).

Leadership is the ability to influence a group to achieve a vision or set of goals depending on the organizational setting (Robbins, 2018). To accomplish the company's goals quickly and effectively, employees need to collaborate and have high morale. While a strong work ethic is important, if motivation and morale suffer, employees may be less able to get through challenges (Permadi et al., 2024).

Expatriates are crucial, but they often struggle to adjust to host-country environments, leading to high failure rates in overseas assignments and financial losses for MNCs (Takeuchi, 2010, in Ge et al., 2019). Expatriation has challenges from cross-cultural differences and unfamiliar organizational settings (Ho, 2012, in Lee et al., 2019). Researchers have found that 40% of all expatriate assignments fail (Robbins & Judge, 2023).

Cultural differences are very important: African societies are more collectivist, focused on relationships and social cohesion. North Americans, Europeans, and Latin Americans are more individualistic (Hofstede, 2001). Each region has its own management style and organization influenced by national culture (Robbins & Judge, 2023). Failure to adapt management approaches may lead to:

- Low staff confidence
- Minimal knowledge transfer
- Reduced commitment to the organization
- Loss of leadership effectiveness (Pokharel, 2016)

Effective leadership, as perceived by African managers, may be different from expatriates' perceptions of effective leadership (Lituchy et al., 2017). Thus, expat managers should be aware of the influence of their own cultural background on their management style and adapt it accordingly. Expatriate performance is ultimately affected by culture shock, language barriers, and misunderstandings of organizational and cultural expectations, which may cause stress, lack of engagement, and decreased morale (Rohman et al., 2023).

Expatriate leadership is all about being flexible. Performance depends on the ability of leaders to adapt to their teams, because adaptation is an essential step in the socialization process of organizations and successful collaboration (Guzmán-Rodríguez et al., 2023).

Expatriate managers should be seen as strategic knowledge brokers that link home and host organizations. They are more effective when they combine professional experience with cross-cultural competence, social capital, trust, and strong interpersonal skills (Jawad, 2020). Thus, African firms need to embrace comprehensive sequential cross-cultural training based on the needs of employees (Iheanachor et al., 2024). A healthy organizational culture with respect, fairness, support, and trust creates a positive work environment and improves expatriate adjustment (Hadi et al., 2024; Akter et al., 2023b; Engelbrecht & Samuel, 2019; Sahoo & Sahoo, 2019, in Akter et al., 2024).

The key factors that determine successful expatriate leadership are:

- Reduced nationalistic egocentrism
- Cultural adaptability
- Accepting ambiguity (AlMazrouei & Zacca, 2015)

These qualities help the expatriate to enjoy cultural differences, adapt to local customs, and cope with ambiguous situations. Aziz et al. (2019) also highlight cross-cultural competencies such as relationship building, diversity appreciation, information skills, ambiguity management, analytical communication, proactivity, flexibility, and stress management as critical for expatriate success in diverse environments.

The COVID-19 pandemic and changes in work practices are turning expatriation into a mixed ecosystem (Klein & Luiz, 2026). Expatriate roles are now all in-person to all virtual and require physical and digital adaptation, and the ability to build professional capital across different assignment types (Mendenhall & Reiche, 2024, in Klein & Luiz, 2026). Hybrid work models present both opportunities and challenges, particularly for early-career assignees, since legitimacy, exposure and trust are still largely built face-to-face. Perceived organizational support is important for the improvement of expatriates' integration, organizational commitment and retention (Khedher & Asadullah, 2019 cited in Chen et al., 2024). The likelihood of failure rates being reduced, adjustment being improved, and sustainable performance being achieved increases for organizations that invest in cross-cultural preparation, expectation management, lifelong learning, mentoring, and culturally responsive leadership development (Pokharel, 2016).

Finally, research shows that cultural distance and cross-cultural adjustment are immediate predictors of expatriate effectiveness, but achievement, sociability, organizational support and language skills are also important for successful adjustment (Salgado & Bastida, 2017). Local and expatriate leaders in Africa are increasingly adopting hybrid leadership approaches and transformational behaviors are proving most effective (Lituchy et al., 2017). The objective of this study is to identify barriers to effective expatriate manager leadership in Africa at both the individual and organizational levels. It offers an integrated theoretical viewpoint based on the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1971), Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, 2001), Cognitive Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). Firms can employ these views, together with transformational, servant, and adaptive leadership styles and the Ubuntu principle, to devise strategies for tackling these challenges and enhancing the effectiveness of expatriate assignments in Africa. The study recommends the infusion of these notions with leadership approaches and Ubuntu for trust, information sharing, staff morale, and company achievement.

2.1.1 Methodology.

This paper is based on a review of relevant theories, empirical research findings, and reports from the existing literature and is guided by the following research questions:

- i. What individual-level and organizational-level challenges are likely to act as barriers to effective leadership by expatriate managers in Africa?
- ii. What strategic responses can be adopted to address these challenges and enhance the likelihood of successful expatriate assignments in Africa?

3.1.1 Theoretical gaps

Most existing studies of expatriate leadership employ a single theoretical perspective such as cultural factors, social learning, or social identity. Only a few studies have combined Social Learning Theory, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, Social Identity Theory and Social Exchange Theory into one paradigm. Similarly, few studies have integrated these theories with transformational leadership, servant leadership and Ubuntu ideology to explain the success of expatriate leadership in the African context.

3.1.2 Contextual gaps

Hofstede (2001) defines individualism as the degree to which societies stress individual or group interests. Individualist cultures value personal independence, self-reflection and inner experience; collectivist cultures value relationships, social cohesion and the impact of one's actions on others. North Americans, Europeans, and Latin Americans tend to score high on individualism, whereas African countries tend to score high on collectivism (Basabe & Ros, 2005). Cultural differences are not taken into account when assuming that management practices that are successful in Europe and North America can be easily copied in Africa. Conversely, African perspectives tend to highlight community, relationality, social responsibility, and human dignity at the expense of individuality and task-focused performance (Broodryk, 2005, cited in Chibvongodze, 2016). In Africa, people are part of a bigger society hence, interpersonal relationships and communal wellbeing are paramount in the organizational milieu (Mbigi, 1995; Chikaodili, 2019). Thus, African management systems tend to be more concerned with the group performance, and the worth of people as opposed to employees as economic instruments, as cited by George et al. (2012), Muriithi (2017), and Chikaodili (2019).

Furthermore, the cultural orientation in African countries is more focused on the person performing the task and the quality of the relationship than on the task itself, indicating the relational and human aspects of management (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2011, cited in Muriithi, 2017; Chikaodili, 2019). Therefore, it is imperative to contextualize African management theories to address issues such as communal values, interpersonal relationships, collective achievement, and human-centered approaches to organizational achievement. Most extant research on expatriate leadership takes a single theoretical perspective, such as cultural factors, social learning, or social identity. Few studies have combined Social Learning Theory, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Social Exchange Theory into a single paradigm. Similarly, little research has combined these theories with transformational leadership, servant leadership, and Ubuntu ideology to explain the success of expatriate leadership in African environments.

4.0.1. Individual Level Challenges that are likely to act as barriers to effective leadership among expatriate managers in Africa

4.0.2 Intercultural Adaptation and Cultural Disparities

Cross-cultural adaptation is consistently identified as a crucial determinant of expatriate assignment success (scholarly sources). Okpara (2016) emphasizes the need for cross-cultural adaptation for expatriates in Nigeria and notes that difficulties in cultural adjustment might lead to assignment issues and premature repatriation. This implies that expatriate managers must possess cultural awareness and accurately comprehend local behaviors, communication styles, expectations, and work practices. Furthermore, a recent investigation in Nigeria highlights the importance of cross-cultural education and training. Aliyu and Iwu (2025) examined the role of cross-cultural training in the adaptation of expatriates and found that expatriates can have difficulties due to unfamiliar cultural and communication norms. Their study emphasizes the necessity of assisting expatriates and their families in understanding and adapting to the environment of the host country.

4.0.3 Issues About Communication and Language

Linguistic competence fosters a shared social identity and the establishment of in-groups. Nevertheless, individuals and collectives possessing limited proficiency in a particular language face the danger of being marginalized from everyday communication, decision-making processes, information dissemination, and cooperative efforts (Giles and Byrnes 1982; Piekkari et al. 2005; Welch and Welch 2008 as referenced in Selmer & Luring, 2015). Aliyu and Iwu (2025) noted that expatriates encountered challenges related to culture and communication, including comprehending workplace conduct and culturally specific communication styles. Rohman et al. (2023) contend that expatriates who do not acquire or comprehend the language of the host country may struggle to cultivate significant interpersonal connections with local staff and community members (Ott & Michailova, 2017; Ramlan et al., 2018; Wani et al., 2012; Bethel et al., 2020). Wang and Varma (2018) assert that linguistic obstacles can hinder the exchange of information, consultation, and participation in workplace discussions. Insufficient or unclear communication can result in misinterpretation, interpersonal challenges, and suboptimal decision-making (Wani et al., 2012; Hassan et al., 2018). Consequently, substantial empirical studies have established a positive correlation between proficiency in the host country's language and occupational adaptation (Takeuchi, Yun, and Russell, 2002; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005, as cited in Selmer & Luring, 2015). A further challenge is personal barriers to language and communication. Effective expatriate leadership necessitates interaction with employees, consumers, governmental entities, suppliers, community figures, and many stakeholders (Hamze, 2020; Aliyu & Iwu, 2025).

4.0.4 Social Isolation and Relationship-Building Challenges

Expatriates may have feelings of social isolation and struggle to establish social bonds in their new country. Expatriates are employees of an organization who live in a nation other than their main citizenship. Expatriates perform better when they adapt to the host nation's standards and procedures. A lack of adaptability results in an early return to one's country (Harzing, 1995; Vromans et al., 2013, as mentioned by Okpara, 2016).

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), individuals form a portion of their identity through their ties with various organizations. Within the workplace, people form informal social networks that foster a sense of community and identity within positions. This recognition boosts occupational involvement; employees who connect with a supportive peer group are more likely to immerse themselves in their work and devote themselves to it. In addition, Social Identity Theory explains how gender acts as a moderator. Both genders may receive varying identity rewards from their social contacts. In certain cultural contexts, men may associate professional friendships with social position and job validation, whereas women may prioritize emotional bonds, thereby altering the friendship-outcome connection between genders. This theory supports the link between professional friendships and career commitment while also clarifying the moderating role of gender in the three proposed interactions (Balachandar & Gurusamy, 2026).

According to Andresen et al. (2018), it is critical to assist expatriates in developing high-quality social connections that help strengthen bonding social capital. In the workplace, efforts targeted at team cohesion and organizational schemes can enhance fellowship and social support, lowering stress levels. Organizations may also provide information about expatriate communities and encourage expats to participate in local social activities (Andresen et al., 2018). These endeavors are crucial because social networks may provide expatriates with emotional support, informational resources, practical assistance, and opportunities to understand the host culture. According to Iheanachor et al. (2024), for a better transition, African enterprises should provide a more inclusive cross-cultural training program suited to employees' needs based on a thorough needs study. Furthermore, the training should be continual rather than one-time (Iheanachor et al., 2024).

Faller et al. (2026) recently conducted research that emphasizes the critical role of HCLMs in providing supportive leadership, the importance of systematic onboarding, and the impact of high-quality HR services in nurturing interpersonal connections that promote cross-cultural collaboration. Interactions between expatriates and host country nationals (HCNs) are critical for expatriate adjustment and information dissemination (Faller et al., 2026).

According to the findings of Aliyu, M.O. and Iwu, C.G. (2025), the scope of adaptation is divided into three interconnected dimensions: (1) general adjustment, which reflects the level of psychological ease with various environmental factors in the host country; (2) interaction adjustment, which includes the level of psychological comfort in engaging with locals in both professional and social settings; and (3) work adjustment, which represents the level of psychological comfort with specific workplace expectations and standards. As a result, an expatriate manager who is socially isolated may struggle to understand local expectations, create trust with staff, and form the relationships required for successful leadership. As a result, social integration must be considered an important part of expatriate adjustment. Managers at local organizations must emphasize advantageous referents for their workforce, create organizational loyalties among employees, prepare local individuals for the influx of expats, and encourage them to assist and guide these expats.

4.0.5 Psychological Stress, Resilience and Emotional Challenges

Expatriate assignments can place managers under tremendous psychological and emotional strain. Unfamiliar locations, heavy work duties, cultural differences, language challenges, social isolation, and uncertainty may lead to anxiety and stress (Chen, 2019; Hamze, 2020). Chen (2019) established a link between expatriate adjustment, work stress, and job involvement, implying that the ability to cope with foreign settings is critical for maintaining effective performance. As a result, the ability to manage stress is strongly related to resilience and emotional competence. Expatriates may have decreased job involvement and performance if they are unable to cope with unpredictability and unexpected circumstances. However, those who develop strong coping abilities may be better equipped to deal with the psychological demands of international postings.

4.0.6 Personality Traits, Cross-Cultural Competence, and Cultural Intelligence

In expatriate management research, personality characteristics are consistently found to be major predictors of expatriate adjustment, performance, and success on assignment. Successful expatriates who thrive in new surroundings often have personal characteristics that enable them to:

- Understand new cultural norms
- Learn to manage uncertainty
- Develop relationships
- Establish social networks in the host country (Black, 1990; Caligiuri, 2000; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Mol et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006, cited in Aziz et al., 2019).

Success as an expatriate is not only a matter of technical and professional skills but also of psychological preparation and adaptation of oneself to a new cultural context. The literature identifies several key personality traits relevant to expatriate effectiveness, such as:

- Social skills: Helps to build social networks and interpersonal relationships.
- Agreeableness: Encourages positive interactions, trust, and cooperation with host country personnel.
- Conscientiousness: Associated with dependability, responsibility, goal-orientation, and performing well at tasks.
- Emotional stability: Associated with coping with stress and uncertainty.
- Openness to experience: Promotes curiosity, cultural learning, flexibility, and engagement with new ideas (Goldberg, 1992, 1993; John et al., 1991; McCrae & Costa, 1992, as cited in Aziz et al., 2019).

Empirical evidence supports the link between personality traits and expatriate outcomes. For example, the trait of conscientiousness is highly correlated with high job performance because of dependability and achievement orientation (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Day & Silverman, 1989, cited in Aziz et al., 2019). This suggests that a personality assessment can be helpful in the selection and preparation of expatriates. Cross-cultural competence gives expatriates the ability to handle ambiguity, comprehend unexpected situations, and act responsibly in a variety of international settings.

Key features of cross-cultural competence are:

- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Decision-making and analytical skills
- Flexibility in behavior, communication, and expectations
- Stress management & emotional control (Kealey & Ruben, 1979; Popp & Dean, 1990; Ishida, 1992; Stoner, 1972; Hawes & Kealey, 1979, 1981; Aziz et al., 2019)

These features are useful for expatriates:

- Tackle cultural differences
- Develop good relationships
- Adapt and survive in foreign environments (Aziz et al., 2019).

The literature also points to the importance of:

- Flexibility
- Acceptance of diversity
- Emotional intelligence
- Resilience
- Cognitive complexity
- Interpersonal competence
- Ambiguity tolerance (Morley et al., 2010; Sambasivan et al., 2017)

These characteristics reduce uncertainty, improve communication, and build trust with colleagues from different cultures. Conversely, ethnocentrism, rigidity, resistance to learning, and poor interpersonal skills heighten the risk of adjustment and assignment failure.

Cultural intelligence (CQ) refers to the ability to interpret, understand, and respond effectively to culturally diverse situations. High CQ enables expatriates to:

- Recognize cultural differences
- Handle uncertainty
- Change behavior if necessary
- Build good relationships with host-country personnel (Sambasivan et al., 2017; Xing, 2023).

4.0.7 Conflicting Expectations of the Organization and Role Conflict

The foreign environment exerts some pressures on expatriate managers, as coping mechanisms that are effective in the home country may not work well in new cultural settings (Sanchez et al., 2000). For their adaptation, it is important to find a balance between identification with the parent and host cultures; otherwise, internal turmoil is the result. In addition, expatriates have to deal with contradictory expectations of the organization, such as caring for the headquarters' interests and gaining legitimacy within the organization in the host country (Sanchez et al., 2000). This dual role may cause role conflict, especially where local standards are in conflict with rules from the HQ. Good management needs political sensitivity and cultural adaptability (Spiegel et al., 2018). These problems are compounded in Africa by the interaction between global and local systems. Cross-cultural training and a clear repatriation plan can reduce stress, and success is dependent on accepting dual identification (Sanchez et al., 2000).

4.0.8 Performance of Work and Results of Assignments

Individual problems ultimately affect the effectiveness of expatriate labor and the success of assignments. Competent job performance is the capacity of the expatriates and their companies to effectively handle the existing challenges and deficits of the organization (Wang & Varma, 2018, in Rohman, 2023). In contrast, bad performance might be caused by the inability to handle organizational and contextual issues (Bayraktar, 2019, cited in Rohman, 2023). Poor performance can lead to early repatriation, higher staff turnover, and negative outcomes for the overall performance of the organization (Akhal & Liu, 2019; Stanciu & Vauclair, 2018). Hence, the concept of expatriate failure should not be restricted to the narrow idea of premature repatriation. Could include poor job performance, problems in establishing effective relationships, ineffective leadership, failure to achieve the goals of an assignment, and problems integrating into the host-country organization.

5.0.1 Organizational-Level Challenges Causing Expatriate Assignment Failure

Organizational support from coworkers and supervisors plays a critical role in helping expatriates acquire intelligence about the host country and organization, facilitating their adjustment and performance (Kb & Asadullah, 2020). Supportive leadership, collaborative cultures, ethical practices, effective communication, a learning orientation, and robust human resource support all contribute to successful expatriate adjustment. In contrast, excessive control, mistrust, poor communication, weak leadership, and resistance to learning increase the likelihood of assignment difficulties and failure (Hetrick, 2023; Applebaum & Roy-Girard, 2007).

5.0.2 Inadequate Cross-Cultural Preparation and Training

Expatriates are often chosen primarily for technical skills, with insufficient preparation for the cultural, interpersonal, institutional, and psychological demands of international assignments. Cross-cultural training should be viewed as a continuous process, not limited to pre-departure orientation, as expatriate adjustment evolves throughout the assignment (Iheanachor et al., 2024).

Common organizational weaknesses include ambiguous or insufficient information about the host country, leading expatriates to rely on stereotypes, which may not reflect actual conditions (Choi, 2008). Inadequate preparation exposes expatriates to culture shock, communication difficulties, role ambiguity, misunderstanding of local practices, and ineffective leadership. Research highlights inadequate mental and physical preparation, reluctance to accept unfamiliar cultures, and limited knowledge of host-country culture as key contributors to adjustment challenges (Singh et al., 2017; Harari et al., 2018, as cited in Aliyu & Iwu, 2025).

Culture shock can negatively affect psychological well-being and organizational performance, resulting in stress, reduced work quality, and diminished job performance (Adler & Aycan, 2018; Dimitrova et al., 2019; Giorgi et al., 2020; Hussain & Deery, 2018; Sambasivan et al., 2017). Organizations should thus provide ongoing, comprehensive training focused on cultural awareness, communication, conflict management, local business practices, institutional knowledge, and experiential learning opportunities.

5.0.3 Weak Knowledge Management and Knowledge Transfer Systems

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Effective knowledge transfer relies on people, tasks, and tools, with a competitive advantage stemming from focusing on people and their interactions (Rosellini & Hawamdeh, 2020; Argote & Ingram, 2000, as cited in Rosellini & Hawamdeh, 2020). Knowledge management systems must enable employees to apply information to their job tasks (Becerra-Fernandez & Sabherwal, 2010).

Expatriates facilitate the transfer of managerial expertise, organizational culture, technology, and market knowledge between headquarters and subsidiaries (Ge et al., 2019). However, successful knowledge transfer requires collaboration, effective communication, and supportive organizational structures (Chang et al., 2012; Horak & Yang, 2016, as cited in Jawad, 2020). Weak systems, poor relationships, or perceptions of expatriates as unwilling to learn can hinder knowledge transfer, undermining strategic objectives. Language and communication barriers may further restrict information sharing and collaboration (Ott & Michailova, 2017; Ramlan et al., 2018; Wani et al., 2012; Wang & Varma, 2018, as cited in Rohman et al., 2023). The use of expatriates can help MNEs safely transfer technological knowledge while maintaining control and reducing unwanted knowledge spillovers (Belderbos et al., 2026).

5.0.4 Inadequate Leadership Support and Development

Leadership development and organizational support are crucial for expatriate effectiveness. Perceived organizational support (POS) correlates with successful adaptation, highlighting the need for robust institutional policies and enhanced language and cross-cultural training (Du-Babcock & Chan, 2025). Advanced ICT systems can mitigate communication challenges, especially in less-developed regions.

MNCs require leaders to adapt to managing cultural diversity, institutional complexity, and cross-cultural collaboration, but may not invest sufficiently in these competencies. Supportive host-country leadership, structured onboarding, mentoring, coaching, and quality HR services facilitate adjustment (Faller et al., 2026). Without such support, expatriate leaders face complex challenges alone. Continuing support regular communication, mentoring, feedback, and access to resources—enables expatriates leader to manage uncertainty and perform more effectively.

5.0.5 Role Ambiguity and Conflicting Organizational Expectations

Role ambiguity arises when expatriates struggle to understand organizational systems, procedures, responsibilities, and expectations, particularly when these differ from their home organizations (Van den Brande et al., 2016). It may result from insufficient organizational knowledge, limited initiative to learn, inadequate social interaction, and conflicts between expatriates and organizations (Doki et al., 2018; Qureshi et al., 2017; Sambasivan et al., 2017; Setti et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017).

Consequences include increased psychological stress, burnout, and reduced job performance (Giorgi et al., 2020; Holodyski, 2013; Wang & Varma, 2018). Organizations should provide clearly defined responsibilities, reporting relationships, performance expectations, decision-making authority, and communication channels.

5.0.6 Institutional and Stakeholder Challenges in African Host Countries

Institutional conditions, labour regulations, government policies, and stakeholder expectations shape staffing, leadership, and effectiveness in African host countries (Wang, 2025). MNCs must engage with diverse stakeholders (government, regulators, community leaders, businesses, civil society) whose expectations may differ from headquarters (Nkrumah et al., 2024). Unprepared expatriates may struggle with stakeholder engagement, suffer reputational damage, and face strategy implementation challenges. Preparation should include institutional intelligence and understanding the legal, political, economic, social, and stakeholder landscape.

5.0.7 Organizational Culture and Employee Relations

Organizational culture can either support or hinder expatriate effectiveness. Cultures of trust, inclusion, collaboration, and learning foster success, while those of mistrust, excessive control, poor communication, or discrimination undermine it (Hetrick, 2023; Applebaum & Roy-Girard, 2007). Social Identity Theory explains how expatriates and local employees may self-categorize into groups based on nationality, language, ethnicity, or affiliation, creating in-group/out-group perceptions and weakening trust and cooperation. Organizations should build inclusive cultures that emphasize a shared identity while respecting cultural differences.

Organizations with a strong culture are better able to retain committed employees who feel satisfied about their jobs, which reduces staff turnover. Job satisfaction is a challenging issue for the management of any organization. Through organizational culture, it is possible to increase job satisfaction, which in turn can nurture an employee's commitment and willingness to stay for a longer period (Jigjiddorj et al., 2021).

6.0.1 Strategic Responses to Expatriate Leadership Challenges: An Integrated Theoretical Perspective

The literature demonstrates that expatriate assignment failure is a complex phenomenon that cannot be adequately explained by a single theoretical perspective. Individual-level challenges such as cultural adjustment, language barriers, psychological stress, limited cultural intelligence, and interpersonal difficulties interact with organizational challenges like inadequate training, weak organizational support, role ambiguity, poor knowledge management, and institutional complexity.

According to Pokharel (2016), organizations that invest in comprehensive cross-cultural preparation, expectation management, continuous learning, mentoring, and culturally responsive leadership development are significantly more likely to:

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- Reduce expatriate failure rates
- Improve expatriate adjustment
- Strengthen employee relationships
- Enhance knowledge transfer
- Achieve sustainable organizational performance in Africa and other culturally diverse international contexts

Building on these insights, this study proposes an integrated strategic framework to enhance effective leadership among expatriate managers in Africa. As outlined in the table below, leadership effectiveness is likely to increase when expatriate managers can:

- Learn from the host culture
- Understand and respect cultural differences
- Develop inclusive identities
- Establish reciprocal relationships
- Inspire and empower followers
- Adapt their leadership behavior
- Serve others
- Embrace locally meaningful communal values

Therefore, integrating transformational, adaptive, servant, and Ubuntu leadership with the four foundational theories outlined in the table below offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding and strengthening expatriate leadership effectiveness in African contexts.

Table:1 Integrated Strategic Framework for Successful Expatriate Assignments

Integrated Strategic Framework for Successful Expatriate Assignments			
Theoretical Perspective	Key Challenge Addressed	Strategic Response	Expected Outcome
Social Learning Theory	Limited cross-cultural competence	Continuous learning, mentoring, coaching, experiential training	Improved cultural intelligence and leadership capability
Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory	Cultural misunderstandings	Cultural intelligence development, adaptive leadership, localized HR practices	Better expatriate adjustment and reduced cultural conflict
Social Identity Theory	In-group/out-group divisions	Inclusive leadership, multicultural teams, participatory decision-making	Increased collaboration, trust, and knowledge sharing
Social Exchange Theory	Low trust and organizational commitment	Ethical leadership, reciprocity, organizational justice, employee empowerment	Higher morale, commitment, and organizational performance
Social Learning Theory	Limited cross-cultural competence	Continuous learning, mentoring, coaching, experiential training	Improved cultural intelligence and leadership capability

6.0.2 Integrating Leadership Approaches to Improve Expatriate Success in Africa.

An integrated theoretical perspective based on Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1971), Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, 2001), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) provides a broad foundation for understanding strategic responses to expatriate challenges. The inclusion of transformational leadership, servant leadership, adaptive leadership, and the idea of Ubuntu adds strength to these perspectives, culminating in a culturally relevant

approach to expatriate leadership in Africa. The current study proposes combining these four theories with leadership techniques and Ubuntu to improve trust, information sharing, employee morale, and organizational success. Four theoretical perspectives.

The theories listed below provide complementary explanations for expatriate effectiveness:

- i. Social Learning Theory explains how expatriates learn culturally appropriate behaviors through observation, interaction, and experience (Bandura, 1977).
- ii. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory emphasizes the impact of national cultural values on management conduct (Hofstede, 2001).
- iii. Social identity theory explains how expatriates and host-country employees develop and negotiate group identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).
- iv. The Social Exchange Theory emphasizes reciprocity, trust, support, and mutually beneficial interactions (Blau, 1964).

Integrating these ideas with transformational, adaptive, servant, and Ubuntu-based leadership styles increases their explanatory and practical utility. Transformational leaders make ethical decisions and provide fair opportunities. They follow consistent policies and treat employees with respect and decency, which improves morale and working climate (Akter et al., 2024).

Expatriate leaders rely on local employees' collaboration and support (Toh & DeNisi, 2005). Appointment by headquarters does not imply authority; expatriate managers must create credibility, form relationships, and demonstrate local knowledge. Transformational leadership, which emphasizes intrinsic motivation, shared vision, follower development, and organizational change, can motivate culturally diverse individuals and build commitment to common goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Importantly, transformational leadership combines principles with Ubuntu, including human dignity, solidarity, teamwork, and service (Mbigi, 2002; Milner & McCarthy, 2016; Ujomudike, 2016, referenced in Sipondo, 2025).

Servant leadership is defined as empowering and developing others, demonstrating humility and genuineness, building trust and justice, and offering guidance. High-quality connections are intended to facilitate self-actualization, positive job attitudes, performance, and a commitment to sustainability and corporate responsibility (Van Dierendonck, 2011). This method is particularly applicable in African cultures, where service to others, communal duty, and collective well-being are central leadership ideals (Chasi & Levy, 2016; Masango, 2002; Tirmizi et al., 2019, as referenced in Sipondo, 2025). Servant leadership contributes to Social Exchange Theory by fostering trust, reciprocity, and supportive connections between expatriate managers and host-country personnel.

Adaptive Leadership: Expatriates frequently encounter uncertainty, anxiety, and tension in unfamiliar cultural settings (Hamze, 2020). Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have changed expatriate positions, offering new management styles, digital tools, hybrid work models, and new career and networking opportunities (Klein & Luiz, 2026). Adaptive leadership describes how leaders promote effective change on an individual, organizational, and societal level (Northouse, 2015). It focuses on adapting behaviors and methods to new situations, which is especially important in multicultural environments (Saleh & Athari, 2023; Aliyu & Iwu, 2025). Leadership practices are culturally contingent; efficacy in one setting may not be applicable in another (Aliyu & Iwu, 2025). Adaptability, cultural understanding, and inclusive approaches help cross-cultural leaders succeed (El Kassar, 2018). Expatriate managers must adapt by evaluating unfamiliar conditions, adapting leadership practices, engaging local stakeholders, and balancing competing cultural expectations.

Ubuntu Leadership is an African philosophy that focuses on humane connections and collective personhood, emphasizing interconnection, mutual responsibility, solidarity, and respect (Ramose, 2002; Broodryk, 2005, as referenced in Chibvongodze, 2016). Leadership in Africa is people-driven and welfare-oriented rather than outcome-focused, promoting policies that harness human capital and boost productivity in accordance with African success principles (Abebe et al., 2020, as referenced in Bukusi et al., 2023). Ubuntu offers an African perspective for understanding leadership techniques, stressing shared accountability and collective achievement (Van Norren & Beehner, 2021, as quoted in Sipondo, 2025).

While Ubuntu shares characteristics with transformational and servant leadership, it is distinguished by its socio-cultural, communal, historical, and relational roots (Sipondo, 2025). These perspectives show that expatriate leadership performance is improved when managers can learn from the host culture, understand cultural differences, and develop inclusive identities. Create relationships of mutuality, inspire and enable followers, and adapt leadership behaviors; serve others; embrace community ideals that are relevant to the local area

The integrated paradigm, which combines servant, transformational, participative, and adaptable leadership with Ubuntu ideology, mirrors indigenous African values and contemporary leadership theory. This approach builds trust, facilitates knowledge transfer, improves organizational performance, and fosters long-term partnerships between multinational corporations and African communities by emphasizing ethical service, inspiring vision, inclusive participation, adaptive learning, and communal responsibility.

6.0.1 Conclusion:

The literature review reveals that expatriate assignment failure in Africa is a multidimensional phenomenon and is the result of the interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual factors. At the individual level, the following challenges are likely to serve

as barriers to the effective leadership of expatriate managers in Africa: cross-cultural adjustment problems, culture shock, language barriers, psychological stress, limited cultural intelligence, lack of interpersonal competence, and role ambiguity. At the organizational level, poor expatriate preparation, weak organizational support, ineffective knowledge management, unclear roles, poor communication, unsupportive organizational cultures, and insufficient leadership development may limit assignment effectiveness. These were identified as challenges likely to serve as barriers to effective leadership by expatriate managers in Africa.

This study provides strategic responses that multinational corporations can take to overcome these challenges and improve the chances of effective leadership among expatriate managers in Africa. Specifically, it provides an integrated theoretical lens of cross-cultural adjustment, cultural intelligence, servant leadership, transformational leadership, adaptive leadership, social learning theory, social exchange theory, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, and the African philosophy of Ubuntu to address expatriate leadership challenges and enhance assignment success. The paper argues that successful expatriate assignments in Africa require extensive cross-cultural preparation, adaptive and culturally responsive leadership, trust building, organizational support, effective stakeholder engagement, continuous learning, and strong local relationship building.

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