

Cross-cultural communication imperatives

Critical lessons for Western expatriates in multinational companies (MNCs) in sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Purpose – Given the rising expansion of Western multinational companies (MNCs) to the African contexts, the development of expatriates and local employees has become increasingly important to the human resource management of these MNCs. This paper aims to provide critical lessons on cross-cultural communication competences for Western expatriates working in the sub-Saharan Africa business environment.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is a qualitative phenomenology that makes use of lived experiences of senior expatriate staff working in Ghana in the form of direct interviews.

Findings – Results showed that cross-cultural communication competence is very important for Western expatriates' functioning in sub-Saharan Africa. The findings also established a plethora of cross-cultural communication skills that are essential for Western expatriates' successful adaptation and work outcomes in Africa.

Practical implications – This research argues that there is the need for the appreciations of the differing cultural patterns of expatriates and local staff, and this provides the underlying assumptions of intercultural and cross-cultural communication in global business.

Originality/value – A critical perspective of international business that has scarcely been studied offers lessons for Western expatriates working in sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords Adaptation and adjustment, Ghana, Cross-cultural communication, Communication skills, Expatriates, MNCs, Sub-Saharan Africa

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Research and anecdotal evidence show that communication is the oil that lubricates management policies to the understanding of individuals in work organisations. This is because communication permeates all facets of organisational activities and, therefore, is regarded as a significant managerial tool in the management process (Abugre, 2012; Konopaske and Ivancevich, 2004). Consequently, international business (IB) researchers (Moran *et al.*, 2011; Thomas, 2008; Lustig and Koester, 2006) have advanced the significant knowledge of expatriates' cross-cultural communication as a distinctive factor that increases multinational companies (MNCs)'s capabilities and successes in global markets. As multinational organisations continue the search for transnational markets, it is cultural communication that impacts greatly on their transnational processes as communication facilitates relationship development (Jeannet, 2000) and enhances contextual knowledge that necessitates the effective and smooth interactions between expatriates and local staff (Riusala and Sutari, 2004).



Cross-cultural communication is the process of interaction and understanding of the communication codes, value orientations of people and how people relate with each other through language and communication in a particular environment (Moran *et al.*, 2011; Lustig and Koester, 2006). Therefore, competence in cross-cultural communication enables expatriates to appreciate the differences in context-related modes of communication especially within the subsidiaries of MNCs in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). With the increasing influence of globalisation, different cultures around the world converge to interact, and this process of global interaction affects the work of expatriates from different cultures. SSA however presents a complex and multifaceted market environment to the Western and global world because of the wide range of differences in beliefs, values, norms and social practices of her people. As a result, the subcontinent comprises the linguistic diversity of any region in the world (Bowden, 2007). This makes it difficult for Westerners to appreciate the value of African management practices leading to misconception and derogatory description of the subcontinent (Jackson, 2004). However, the global business environment demands high professional expertise and understanding of cultural diversity through the application of both cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity (Chen, 2013). There is therefore the need for a polycontextual sensitivity with regard to contextual variables that are locally sensitive to specific people (Von Glinow *et al.*, 2004). Hence, appreciating African cultural diversity would facilitate expatriates' effective communication in the SSA market with its diverse people and ethnic pluralism.

Consequently, the focus of this paper is to present some critical perspectives of cross-cultural communication based on the geopolitical diversity and pluralism of the subcontinent that impact on IB in Africa. As expatriates are key players in the management process and practices of MNCs in subsidiaries, we explore how cross-cultural communication variables can enhance expatriate work life in SSA. Although empirical support exists for the relevance of cultural knowledge as a self-maintenance competency for expatriate assignment (Black and Mendenhall, 1990), research works have not directly addressed the important phenomenon of cross-cultural communication skills as a significant cultural knowledge that enhances expatriates' communication and work outcomes in the subsidiaries. Similarly, the past two decades have witnessed the importance of culture and cultural effects leading to an increasing interest in cross-cultural management research; yet, many of these cross-cultural studies continue to suffer from some primary limitations (Tung, 2008). A major limitation is the erroneous assumption of global cultural homogeneity that emphasises either a Western-centric or Eurocentric culture. However, given the increasing number of MNCs' search for new markets in the sub-Saharan African business environment, variations in expatriate management in these unexploited areas can be more demanding and significant than the assumptions taken for granted. The lack of diverse and contextual cultural knowledge makes international human resource management (IHRM) theory deficient and limited. Hence, there is the danger in critical studies of being too strongly biased towards the powerful West (Venkateswaran and Ojha, 2017). A second limitation is the lack of cross-cultural communication and language studies of expatriates as a critical perspective in IB globally (Harzing and Feely, 2008). There is therefore the need to balance cross-cultural investigations to truly understand the globalisation of the cultural phenomena (Tung, 2008) as a critical perspective of IB. Thus, the purpose of this study is to empirically examine the cross-cultural communication skills that are imperative to cross-cultural management theory and practice, which contributes to expatriates' effective communication and work outcomes in host subsidiaries in SSA. The major contributions of this work are the empirical novelty of strategic portfolio of effective cross-cultural communication skills and competencies recommended by the paper. These cross-cultural

communication skills and competencies are prerequisite for successful adaptation and adjustment of expatriates in complex and multilingual environments.

Theoretical framework

We draw from the cross-cultural adaptation theory to understand the process by which expatriates can learn and draw lessons from contextual variations and adjustment. Cross-cultural adaptation explains why foreign workers or immigrants ought to establish and maintain a relatively stable and reciprocal relationship with their host environment (Kim, 2005).

Cross-cultural adaptation has been well studied for decades (Kim, 2001) in the international management literature. It is a process of dynamic development of the natural human tendency to search for an internal equilibrium in the face of frequently adversarial situational conditions (Kim, 2008). In the case of the expatriate in a foreign subsidiary (e.g. in Africa), multiple forces are simultaneously at work surrounding the communicative interface between the expatriate and the host environment (Kim, 2005). For instance, these multiple forces may include the complex and multilingual nature of the sub-Saharan African environment and the cultural and personal predispositions of the expatriate himself or herself. Thus, to adopt and cope with the cultural patterns of the host environment, expatriates should be able to triumph over the contextual uncertainties. Uncertainty can be referred to as the difficulties arising from verbal and non-verbal communication practices in diverse cultures including low- and high-context environments (Gudykunst, 2003; Berger, 1997). This makes cross-cultural communication an emotional process and a potential for misinterpretation between diverse people, as it involves a great deal of uncertainty (Ozcelik and Paprika, 2010). Thus, for a Western expatriate to successfully understand the uncertainties in the sub-Saharan African multilingual context, he/she needs to first reduce these perceived uncertainties. Uncertainty reduction deals with the ways people gather information about other people (Berger, 1997) to appreciate and adapt to them. The application of uncertainty reduction in cross-cultural management and adaptation explains how expatriates in different cultures may seek to first reduce uncertainties in their initial stages of relationships (Gudykunst and Kim, 1992) with host country nationals. Whilst uncertainty reduction in the host country can lead to proficiency of the new environment, the emotional well-being of expatriates during the adjustment process in the subsidiaries should be a major concern (Ying and Liese, 1991). Consequently, cross-cultural scholars have indicated the need to examine the sociocultural and psychological aspects of cross-cultural adaptation (Ward and Rana-Deuba, 1999; Ward and Kennedy, 1994; Ying and Liese, 1991). Sociocultural adjustment describes how an expatriate can fit into the different facets of a new culture by experiencing and overcoming the difficulties or concerns in the performance of his/her daily tasks in the new environment (Ward and Rana-Deuba, 1999). These include the ability to communicate effectively with members of the host culture, as sociocultural adjustment is associated with the cultural and social norms of the host subsidiary. On the other hand, the psychological adjustment of an expatriate is carefully linked to the expatriate's emotional state and his cognitive and personality attributes (Ward and Kennedy, 1996). Thus, the psychological adjustment of expatriates in foreign subsidiaries suggests that expatriates' adaptation to subsidiary cultural and communicative behaviours is rooted in how competent they can communicate effectively to solve managerial issues in the subsidiary. Hence, cross-cultural adaptation theory can support the use of communication and language competencies for expatriate cross-cultural learning. Such competencies would include expatriates' willingness to communicate (Black, 1990); communication competence of expatriates and communicative behaviours of the local staff

in SSA subsidiary (Abugre, 2016); and understanding of host-country language and language fluency (Shaffer *et al.*, 1999).

The imperative nature of cross-cultural communication in international management

There is the need for global managers or expatriates to understand the context of communication and interpersonal behaviours of local employees in the African landscape through cross-cultural adaptation. This is because cross-cultural communication is a fundamental human behaviour that is derived from the need for different people and different cultures to interact with each other (Samovar and Porter, 1997). The imperative nature of cross-cultural communication is its ability to facilitate our appreciation of the diverse and context-related communication behaviours of people (Hall, 1959). Cross-cultural communication is more relevant in today's heterogeneous world of social order, which is impacted by globalisation and the rising cross-cultural nature of business negotiations and business communication in multinational businesses. Thus, cross-cultural communication enables people to effectively communicate and appreciate other cultures, and this is critically important in international management practice. Language and communication for MNCs is so significant that its barrier can slow down their operations, thereby increasing the cost of decision-making (Harzing, Koster and Magner, 2011). Thus, individuals who are culturally different but working together need cross-cultural communication competence which comprises the knowledge, motivation and skills necessary to interact effectively and appropriately with co-workers from different cultural backgrounds (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009; Arasaratnam and Doerfel, 2005). Similarly, Sias *et al.* (2008) established that language competencies improve relationships and cause individuals to communicate more to understand each other. Hence, cross-cultural communication is the glue that binds multicultural team members together in any multinational project work (Ochieng and Price, 2010). Hence, expatriates need cross-cultural communication competence to work.

The reason is that the aspects of communication behaviour vary from culture to culture, and these behaviours demonstrate the different approaches to individual's interpretations of what they say (Tannen, 1984). This is why communication is a difficult process comprising much more than the words we use. Effective communication involves the interpretation of speech, tone, facial expressions, body language, gestures and assumptions shared between participants about the context and purpose of the exchange (Bradby, 2001). For example, expatriates should be able to explain the appropriate cross-cultural behaviours such as when to communicate or what to say (Tannen, 1984), pacing and pausing in particular context (Tannen, 1984), intonation of foreigners and directedness and indirectness of language use in that environment (Tannen, 1982; Hall, 1959). This is why cross-cultural communication is significantly important in multinational business operations. Its competence can help expatriates become non-judgemental and respectful to other cultures particularly those of SSA, therefore giving them the ability to adapt and to adjust successfully. Hence, the purpose of this work is to expose Western expatriates to some critical lessons on cross-cultural communication in SSA.

The cultural context of cross-cultural communication in sub-Saharan Africa

A number of cross-cultural studies have shown that the African culture and its management practices differ greatly from those of the West. Management practices of African society are deeply rooted in and organised through community and family systems, clans, tribes, villages, age groups, philosophies, doctrines, rituals and beliefs (Adjei, 2007). Accordingly, each tribe or community is distinguished by a language that guides its interactions and

behaviours from other communities. On the other hand, the management practice of the West is embedded in the individual and aligned to a unique and shared language. Similarly, while the West is characterised by low-context communication which typically prescribes verbal and direct communication, the African culture favours high-context communication and sees directness as a threat to group harmony and, therefore, relies more on contextual and non-verbal cues (Yoo *et al.*, 2006; Gudykunst, 2003). Consequently, context drives communication and manipulates the message content and interpretation (Cole, 2015). The reason is that the communicating parties attribute cultural meanings to their experiences and actions (Bjerregaard *et al.*, 2009). For that matter, there are clear differences in the ways in which people from the West and those from SSA communicate and interpret the symbolic behaviours of others and also assign meanings to actions (Lustig and Koester, 2006) when the two groups are working together. It is prudent therefore to accept that cultural diversity or divergence ought to be accepted (Szkudlarek, 2009), by paying attention to the process in which communication is practised in the SSA context. This is possible through cross-cultural training for Western expatriates to be well adjusted to the SSA context (Okpara and Kabongo, 2011).

The SSA business landscape consists of about 48 diverse countries stretching from the savannahs south of the Sahara desert to the coastal mountains of the valleys of the cape with cultures that are varied, diverse with several many ethnic languages (Abdul-Raheem, 1996). Consequently, it is clear that the indigenous people manifest different communication styles and values based on their contextual socialisation, which without doubt would affect communication and management practices in the various MNC subsidiaries in Africa. The diverse cultures of SSA means that there are several indigenous management practices embedded in the different communities. Thus, the presence of the vast multiculturalism means that each country not far off from the other has different ethnic groups with different behaviours and customs (Abugre, 2016), and Africa is the new twenty-first century market where all the industrial powers are moving in to do business. Hence, expatriates have to understand the diversity of the national conditions in the various SSA countries; not only do they have to appreciate that they are guests in the country and abide by traditions, cultures and customs but they also need to understand the mindset of the African people. The absence of knowledge about the diverse national conditions fuels expatriates' misconception about the continent. Some explanations of the misconception of African management system are rooted in endogenous factors such as the relationship between MNCs' headquarters (HQ) and African subsidiaries including its experience of operating in Africa and the cultural distance between management and employees and between foreign management and local managers (Jackson, 2004). Therefore, a thorough appreciation of the different people from the diverse cultures in business contact is significant, as there is no one single standard of global interaction and behaviour of people. Accordingly, MNCs should encourage their expatriate to adapt diverse programmes that reflect the contextual character of subsidiary locations in the globalisation process (Bjerregaard *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, as far as MNCs' HQ and their subsidiaries in SSA continue to coordinate, cross-cultural communication is very important to expatriate work because it is the basis of expatriate work life (Abugre, 2016).

Table I provides a catalogue of some of the major and diverse languages spoken by the various ethnic groups in the SSA region. From Table I, most of the major languages in the subregion are spoken across many African nations, which explains the ethnic pluralism in the subregion. The pluralism of traditions also explains the reason why most indigenous people are faced with multiple languages as means of communication across the subcontinent.

Ethnic group/language	Dwelling place in SSA
Afar	Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea
Afrikaner	South Africa and Namibia
Akan	Ghana and Ivory Coast
Alur	Uganda and DR Congo
Anuak	South Sudan and Ethiopia
Baka	Southeastern Cameroon, Northern Congo and Northern Gabon
Beti-Pahuin	Cameroon, Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Sao Tome and Principe
Biafada	Senegal, Gambia and Guinea-Bissau
Efik	Nigeria and Cameroon
Ewe	Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria and Togo
Fulani	Guinea, Nigeria, Cameroon, Senegal, Mali, Sierra Leone, Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Benin, Niger, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Chad, Mauritania, Sudan, Togo and Ivory Coast
Ga	Ghana and Togo
Great Lakes Twa (Batwa)	Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and DR Congo
Hausa	Nigeria, Niger, Ghana, Benin, Chad, Cameroon and Sudan
Herero	Namibia, Botswana and Angola
Hutu	Rwanda, Burundi and DR Congo
Lugbara People	Uganda and DR Congo
Makonde	Tanzania and Mozambique
Mole-Dagbani	Ghana, Burkina Faso and Northern Togo
Oromo	Ethiopia, Sudan and Kenya
San(Bushmen)	South Africa, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique, Swaziland, Botswana, Namibia and Angola
Shona	Mozambique and Zimbabwe
Somali	Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya
Sotho	Lesotho, South Africa and Zimbabwe
Swahili	Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique
Swazi	Swaziland, South Africa and Mozambique
Tigray-Tigrinya	Ethiopia and Eritrea
Tsonga	Swaziland, South Africa and Mozambique (Chiredzi and Mwenezi)
Tutsi	Rwanda, Burundi and DR Congo
Wayeyi	Namibia, Botswana and Angola
Zulu	South Africa

Source: Author's research

Table I.
Classification of
ethnic groups and
languages spoken in
SSA

Whilst some of these major languages are further divided into smaller linguistics groups within the various clans, what makes it more difficult is the fact that the SSA countries were partitioned and colonised by different colonial masters from Europe, who imposed their languages such as English, French, Spanish and Portuguese on the Africa continent. These foreign languages have become the official mode of communication at work and in schools. The predicament of the African is the effect of these colonial languages on the indigenous languages and cultural behaviours. Consequently, an educated African in a typical MNC subsidiary is confronted with different approaches to linguistic behaviours during communication with an expatriate from the West. Whereas the expatriate or the Westerner is simply used to his or her unique maternal language that is either English, French or Portuguese, the local African worker has to deal with the multiple languages including the

“imposed” official language at work. This makes communication and understanding a difficult task when interacting with foreigners at work, as the African is compelled to filter between the communicative styles of his/her maternal language and that of the official language at work or school. Therefore, the multifaceted cross-cultural dynamics in SSA countries call for appreciation and acceptance of the different dimensions of communicative behaviours in the subsidiaries of MNCs in Africa. Global managers can only be culturally sensitive to the local African worker if they are able to acknowledge the complex and diverse cultural dimensions of the SSA environment and adapt to them.

In the context of this study, the business landscape in Ghana is proliferated with multinational companies mainly from the West. This stems from the good investment climate which has accorded Ghana with accolades such as global best performer in access to credit, 2011; best place for doing business in West Africa; and 67th position out of 183 most business friendly countries in the world (World Bank Report, 2011). Thus, about 53 per cent of all projects registered are Greenfield investments, while 47 per cent are Western joint ventures with the Government of Ghana (GIPC, 2009). The Ghanaian context has thus facilitated the operations of several MNCs in the country that this study is investigating. This study is therefore appropriate in providing critical lessons to foreign expatriates on cross-cultural communication in a sub-Saharan African context.

Research design and data analysis

The significance of the subject of this study requires a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of cross-cultural communication, which requires fewer but intensive interviews in which the researcher becomes intensively involved to better appreciate participants’ daily-lived application of cross-cultural communication in the various subsidiaries. Thus, the authors adopted phenomenology as a qualitative method of data gathering and analysis for this study. Phenomenology is concerned with human experience – a phenomenon that is known to us through our senses (Descombe, 2003). Phenomenology tends to assess data thematically to extract the fundamental nature and essence of participants’ meanings (Miles *et al.*, 2014). The phenomenological approach elicits the empirical matters from the perspective of those being studied (Creswell, 1998). It serves as the rationale behind efforts to understand individuals by entering into their field of perception to see life as these individuals see it (Bruyn, 1966); therefore it is considered as an effective method of gathering everyday-lived experiences of people through interviews. Hence, the choice of phenomenology for this study is very appropriate, as communication involves everyday-lived experiences of people in the form of interactions.

Case sampling for the study

Formulating preliminary research questions is also essential for the selection of appropriate cases to conduct interviews, thereby ensuring a proper assessment of the field of inquiry (Stake, 2005). Therefore, as this study is aimed at providing critical lessons in cross-cultural communication for Western expatriates in Africa, the target cases were senior executive expatriates who occupied senior-level positions in various MNCs in Ghana. It is widely expected that management philosophy towards a firm’s foreign operations is a crucial determinant of MNC management in general, and multinational staffing as organisation’s “dominant logic” substantially shapes corporate strategy and decision-making (Prahalad and Bettis, 1986). Hence, top-level executives of MNCs who are themselves expatriates constituted the population of the qualitative sampling of this study. Top executives are able to share their extensive experiences of working with various genres of employees.

A letter explaining the importance of this investigation was initially sent to the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre (GIPC), which superintend on all foreign direct investments including all MNCs in the country. Thus, the GIPC presented a list of 20 MNCs in addition to a cover letter to all the MNCs to support our study. However, 19 out of the 20 MNCs provided us access to conduct the study. The 19 MNCs are from the mining, communication, food and beverage, automobile and policy industries that participated in the study. Interviews of the participants were conducted from March to September 2012. All interviews were conducted based on appointment scheduled by the interviewee's convenience, and all interviews took place in the offices of the respondents.

Procedure and data coding

We conducted open-ended and mostly unstructured interviews (Yin, 2003) with 21 senior executive expatriates from different countries of origin and different multinational subsidiaries in Ghana. It was an in-depth, one-to-one interview with each participant. Each interview lasted between 51 min and 1 h 15 min. The themes covered in the interviews included the importance of cross-cultural communication, significant elements of cross-cultural communication, importance and influence of non-verbal communication of local staff to expatriate staff and language competence requirements of expatriates in SSA. These themes were carefully selected based on their ability to assess cross-cultural communication and its significance to expatriates. All formal interviews were audio taped, and the benefits of the tape recorder so far outweighed its inconveniences (Sacks, 1992). Its use enabled the authors to engage in long conversations and concentrate on listening and analysing what was being said without having to think about note taking. This is consistent with Sacks (1992; p.5) who argued that one cannot rely on his/her notes or recollections of conversations while doing an interview at the same time. This is because, one does not have a strong intuition for sequencing during conversations.

The taped interviews were transcribed one-by-one from each of the 21 subjects, and the significant statements extracted from these transcriptions became the raw data of this study for analysis. From the transcriptions, meanings were formulated from these significant statements. The formulated meanings were arrived at by reading, rereading and reflecting upon the significant statements in the original transcriptions to get the honest meaning of the interviewees' statements. The combined formulated meanings were then organised and coded into four (cluster) categories of themes, which emerged from and are common to all of the subjects' descriptions. These four major categories are presented as main thematic categories of the interview analysis:

- (1) significance of cross-cultural communication to expatriates in SSA;
- (2) cultural variation in communicative behaviours of expatriates and local staff;
- (3) imperatives of cross-cultural communication knowledge in SSA; and
- (4) desired communication skills of expatriates in SSA.

The categories were referred back to the original descriptions to validate them.

Reliability and validity of the data

Data transcriptions were checked and rechecked many times to offset obvious mistakes in the coding process or possible drift in coding. In instances of more than one interviewee in one company, participants' data were rechecked for consistency and variations. Also, to maximise the validity of the data analysis, we constantly compared notes with the graduate assistants who helped to check for consistency and accuracy in the application of the data

coding procedure. Particularly, we looked for differences and variations across cases and key social and psychological factors that might affect the phenomena coded (Gibbs, 2007). Evidence of validation of the data is also reflected in the copious quotations from the interviews of the participants. A further validation of the categorised data was undertaken by contacting 15 of the expatriates interviewed, as all 21 interviewees could not be contacted again. Seven of the participants were revisited, whereas the other eight were contacted through telephone (telephone numbers of participants were collected by the researcher during the initial interviews). This was done to ask them if the descriptions formulated validated their initial experiences in which they agreed.

Research findings and discussion

Main thematic categories of the interview analysis present the summary of categories and themes derived from the analysis of the interviews of respondents in this study. These thematic categories were the most salient subjects, which emerged from the lived experiences of the interviewees during the analysis of the data.

The significance of cross-cultural communication to expatriates in the African environment

As far as MNCs' HQs and their subsidiaries maintain a close relationship and coordination, cross-cultural communication will remain absolutely significant to expatriate work, as it is the basis for expatriate work life in the subsidiaries. As a result, all participants in the interview affirmed that cross-cultural communication is indispensable to the work of MNCs, particularly their subsidiaries in the sub-Saharan African environment. Results showed that both expatriates and local staff need to communicate and understand the verbal and the non-verbal behaviours of each group in the various subsidiaries. However, as both the groups come from different cultures, misinterpretation of communication by one party can lead to a disagreement. To avoid this, competence in cross-cultural communication is vitally important because that is how work can be done successfully, and that is how the objectives of the business including the understanding of what is needed to be done can be successfully implemented. This is strongly illustrated by a respondent in the following words:

Communicating orally is obviously the crux of any working relationship between western expatriates and local Africans. People have got to understand and comprehend the instructions we give to be able to deliver the expectations inherent in the instructions. So obviously, there's got to be a common understanding between the expatriate and local staff. Though English is the main official language in Ghana, we also take cognizance that there are other major languages that the local Ghanaian speaks and these can affect understanding.

Similarly, another respondent observed that:

Cross-cultural communication is very significant to our work in this context. In fact it is critical, because both expatriates and local staff have to understand what is being asked for, requested, or whatever the case may be. Unfortunately there are different varieties of English language, for instance American and British English, and we have different terms for different things that mean the same in English. We also have what we call slang and if the Ghanaian in most cases is not familiar with that, he might misinterpret what is being said to the person. Equally, the expatriate needs to understand the Ghanaian language styles. Hence, there must be a common understanding of the language for communication to be effective.

Given the above sentiments, it is obvious that cross-cultural management is basically the interaction of culturally diverse workers in the context of multinational companies (Thomas, 2008). During the interviews, it was made clear that the role of an expatriate is to transfer

knowledge and skills and to develop the local staff. Therefore, the goal of every expatriate is to train himself/herself to impart knowledge, skills and competencies, and if he/she is not communicating well with the local staff, it may be difficult to perform this role. Hence, Western managers should understand the influence of the local subsidiary environment on the quality of cross-cultural interactions within the organisation (Cooper *et al.*, 2007). This is highlighted by another respondent in the following excerpt:

Cross-cultural communication is very important, the expatriates are transferring skills and knowledge and if they can't communicate with the staff, how can they transfer skills and how can they develop the employees?

Overall, the interview results indicated largely the significance of cross-cultural communication to Western expatriate assignment in SSA.

Cultural variation in communicative behaviours of Africans and Western expatriates

The integration of two or more cultures will definitely affect the mode of communication in the multinational subsidiary. Cultural and environmental differences between Westerners and local African workers make it possible for varied and distinctive communicative behaviours of people in the subsidiaries. Western expatriates have their idiosyncratic communicative behaviours and so do indigenous African workers. Differences in communicative behaviours arising from specific attitudes, beliefs and expectations can sometimes cause people to erroneously conclude that they differ on substantive issues and, hence, negatively influence their behaviour in the MNC subsidiary. Therefore, Western expatriates ought to understand these observable and symbolic manifestations of the pattern of ideas and actions of the local people when they are working together in the various subsidiaries of MNCs. The differences in communicative behaviours resulting from differences in expectations will certainly affect the work behaviour of expatriates, and the latter will have to address this problem and adapt for successful work outcomes.

The following excerpt from a respondent typifies the cultural and communicative differences that affect an expatriates' work behaviour:

There are differences in attitude towards work and work behaviours between local workers and expatriates from the West. Part of this to me arises from our different attitude to time relationship, individualism and collectivism. Anytime you have different cultures working in the same organisation that is going to affect how you are communicating.

Similarly, a respondent remarked that:

There are differences in communication behaviours between expatriates and local employees. Are they bad differences? No. I think they are just differences due to our cultural upbringing. But it's a matter of everyone understanding how to manage expectations. This is a big difference and I think it's no secret that sometimes things that should be easy to do are not that easy just because of differences in our culture, differences in our business, and differences in the amount of bureaucracy that has to be dealt with here in Ghana which you cannot legally avoid. This does affect communication and understanding to a certain extent.

Cross-cultural difference in communicative behaviours between local staff and expatriates involves varied and distinctive styles of actions including directness and indirectness and formality and informality emanating from the diversity of value systems. These however can affect the interactional approach of the two groups of workers, which may eventually affect the outcome of the work in the company. The basis of what is acceptable and unacceptable attitude of the two groups whilst working together will always be a

contentious issue because of the spread of nationalities and the way of doing things in one's culture.

Strategic imperatives of cross-cultural communication knowledge in sub-Saharan Africa

Cross-cultural training is vital if organisations are to avoid high levels of expatriate failure rate (Debrah and Rees, 2011). Data from the interview results show that competence in cross-cultural communication provides Western expatriates or assignees with most of the knowledge and skills needed to live and work successfully in subsidiary local communities in SSA. The portfolio guidelines of cross-cultural communication imperatives provide essential strategic guidelines for Western expatriates to deal with complex communication problems in SSA.

Desired portfolios of training from respondents are as follows:

- Expatriates need to understand the Ghanaian culture to succeed.
- They need to understand how they can be able to explain things (knowledge and skills) to local staff to understand better.
- More training in English language to expatriates from non-English speaking areas, especially the Ghanaian jargons are critical to learn.
- Behavioural training, e.g. what is culturally acceptable and unacceptable in Ghana, including non-verbal behaviours of Ghanaians, should be organized for expatriates.
- Body language communication, cultural values, dress codes and manners should be taught to expatriates working here, as these affect the behaviour of people.
- Training in cultural elements such as funerals, out-dooring, marriage ceremonies and greetings should be encouraged because you are easily accepted when the locals get to know that you like their culture, thus extending to you the support you need.
- Cultural training is essential for expatriates to learn the basic local language, e.g. Twi lessons, Ghanaian history and geography, the political system and the degree to which Ghanaians align their values with the teachings of the churches. The degree to which the Ghanaian staff are pressured by their family members is because of social cohesiveness.

Desired communication skills of expatriates in sub-Saharan Africa

All interviewees affirmed the critical nature of cross-cultural communication competence of expatriates in their respective multinational subsidiaries. From the organisational point of view, the participants believed that it is very necessary for expatriates going into a country for the first time to have the basic training around the culture and the environment of the host country in which they will work. They emphasised the significance of learning some specific skills that would enable them to understand the behaviours of the local people in the subregion. Hence, [Table II](#) summarises the critical skills and competencies required by Western expatriates working in Ghana and for that matter, SSA.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study is to assess the imperative nature of cross-cultural communication in IB in SSA and offer critical lessons to expatriates who do business in the subregion. Consequently, this work examined the cross-cultural communication imperative of expatriates working in Ghana. Using a phenomenological method of data collection, the

Table II.
Specific communicative behaviours of local staff, and how expatriates can deal with them

Body language behaviours of local people during communication	Techniques or skills for expatriates to deal with body language behaviours of local staff in subsidiaries
Incomprehensive bodily movements of local staff	Engage with local staff and determine how they do things if the behaviour will affect organisation negatively, if not just learn to understand their behaviours because you did not come here to change the cultural behaviours but to work
Silence as a way of communication in Ghana	Make the efforts through cultural sensitisation and programmes to understand the Ghanaian body language in terms of the value of silence in communication. Take additional steps towards Ghanaians to gain understanding of their behaviours
Lack of eye contact, posturing referring to an expatriate as an authority person, and therefore do not question them during discussions	Ask for validations, e.g. ask people to give their own ideas on the issue Have more patience and ask more questions and take the right approach to problem-solving
Avoiding a direct discussion and being indirect in most cases Silence and withdrawn posture	Try to encourage people to just communicate in a non-threatening way in the interest of solving the problem Bring expatriates and locals together to settle differences through a neutral arbiter. Focus on what to expect from each other
Mixing English and local dialects, excessive use of paralinguistics Holdback, excessive formality, addressing by formal titles, begging or subservient tone by local staff	Ask question of clarification, it can initially be problematic, but would get used to it Explain that you do not expect formality in work. Explain your own cultural context, but be careful that he/she does not take offence with cultural issues
Slow in exacting jobs – the Ghana man time (GMT)	Explain the importance of the situation to the person that his/her input is another's raw material so the work would be done fast. Initial problem with local behaviour, but as time goes on it will be ok

empirical findings indicated largely that cross-cultural communication competence plays a critical role in making it possible for Western expatriates to communicate effectively in the subsidiaries. Also, the findings have indicated the imperative nature of cross-cultural communication to the work of expatriates in SSA, and therefore validates the works of [Kim \(2008\)](#), [Gudykunst \(2003\)](#) and [Tannen \(1984\)](#) on the importance of cross-cultural communication in multinational business. The essence of cross-cultural communication is to make people understand the attitude and communicative behaviours of people from a different context or of a certain origin to be able to effectively communicate with them. Consequently, the significance of expatriates acquiring competence in cross-cultural communication is very appropriate to their socialisation and transfer of knowledge role in the various subsidiaries. This is particularly important to Western expatriates operating their businesses in complex and multi-lingual environments such as SSA. To communicate successfully and understand the complex nature of sub-Saharan African business environment, Western expatriates should be ready to accept the uncertainties arising from the differences of the local people they work with in the sub-Saharan African business environment. This presupposes that Western expatriates should be sensitive to the cultural diversity and the multilingual character of the Africans to avoid the pejorative and derogatory description of Africa ([Jackson, 2004](#)). The imperative nature of cross-cultural communication competence implies that expatriates ought to acquire the cultural skills of contextual communication to better understand the nature and character of the indigenous

African. The reason is that there are certainly cultural differences in the communicative behaviours of the local staff and expatriates working in the multinational subsidiaries in Africa as suggested by the findings of this current study. This implies that Western expatriates should try to appreciate the observable actions and symbolic manifestations of the Africans that seem to be at odds with the expectations of the expatriates during work in the subsidiaries. If the major role and function of expatriates is to transfer knowledge and skills in the subsidiaries (Chang *et al.*, 2012), then the only way to successfully harness the potentials, energy and innovativeness of the African is to adapt to these observable differences in attitudes and beliefs to address the problems of successful work outcomes. The successful adaptation of Western expatriates to these cultural and communicative differences would undoubtedly guide them on specific skills to negotiate communicative barriers in the SSA business environment.

Also, results of this study provide the strategic imperatives of cross-cultural communication knowledge and a range of desired guidelines for training expatriates who intend to do business in the subregional business enclave. The guidelines present a plethora of training needs that are required by expatriates to increase their competencies and skills in communication and understanding of the Ghanaian and for that matter the sub-Saharan African value systems. These guidelines would confidently enable expatriates to adapt well in this multilingual environment. Thus, learning the cultural behaviour of the people and the body language, to be able to know when the locals are with you and when they are not with you during interactions, is critically essential for expatriation in SSA. After all, culturally explained meanings can help to advance the effectiveness of communication of multilingual team members.

Similarly, the findings of this work offer a portfolio of specific communicative behaviours of the local people that Western expatriates can learn or take as lessons for successful adaptation and effective transfer of knowledge and skills to the local people in SSA. The findings facilitate our understanding of the diversity of cultural application and backgrounds of the unique differences in language, tone and accents of local staff in the subsidiaries. Hence, construing non-verbal behaviours and differences in communication can impede workflow and instruction at the workplace. Specifically, training and learning from both expatriates and local staff can hamper the transfer of knowledge and skills in the subsidiaries because of misinterpretation of non-verbal signals of local staff. Therefore, the findings of this work on the specific communicative behaviours of local staff would certainly be of immense benefit to expatriation in the subcontinent and the overall multinational business operations.

Theoretical and practical implications

By integrating adaptation theory with cross-cultural communication of expatriates, we contribute to the intercultural and cross-cultural communication theory in IB in four key areas.

Our first theoretical contribution is the integration of cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2008) with the value systems and communicative behaviours of local staff and the indigenous people (Abugre, 2016). Cultural adaptation is the maintenance of a close relationship with the host country. Adapting to the value systems and communicative behaviours of a group of people is to embrace these communicative behaviours to adjust oneself to them in the host country. Thus, by integrating cultural adaptation and cross-cultural communication proficiency in the host country, a dimension of cross-cultural adaptation has been realised to include the active engagement and skills acquisitions of the value systems and communicative behaviours in host subsidiaries. Cross-cultural

differences in communicative behaviours elicit our understanding of the diverse characteristics of both expatriates and local staff working together. Working as a multicultural team in MNCs calls for an effective engagement with the differing cultural patterns of expatriates and local staff, and this provides the underlying assumptions of intercultural and cross-cultural communication in global business.

Our second theoretical contribution provides evidence of the value of cross-cultural communication competence for multinational business. Communication between strangers is the foundation of human uncertainties and suspicions. Therefore, expatriates as coordinators of MNC HQ and subsidiary locations ought to appreciate the imperative nature of cross-cultural communication in complex environments. Competence in cross-cultural communication reduces the uncertainties and suspicions between expatriates and local staff in MNCs. Thus, appreciating the communicative styles and behaviours of the local people in SSA would facilitate and enhance Western expatriate's understanding of the African behaviour and management systems, thereby increasing our knowledge in intercultural and cross-cultural management.

A third theoretical implication of this work demonstrates that effective communication and practical know-how are interrelated. Thus, competence in the non-verbal and communicative behaviours of a group of people is to know their culture and be able to deal with their idiosyncrasies for successful adaptation. Successful adaptation of expatriates begins by experiencing the behaviours and ways of living in the host country. This includes equipping oneself with strong emotions learnt or experienced in the host country that would lead to positive career outcomes of both expatriates and MNCs as a whole. Hence, by indicating through our various findings, the dimensions of the non-verbal expressions and how to appreciate their meanings to offset expatriates' difficulties in communication patterns have clearly extended our knowledge in the interpersonal communication theory.

A fourth theoretical implication of this work is the extension of cross-cultural training programmes in IB. This study has offered a plethora of training skills and curricula (Table II) which can reinforce cross-cultural training in IHRM. This contribution also extends our theoretical awareness of the experiential learning in place of abstract knowledge acquired in the classroom. Experiential learning is best assimilated at locations. Thus, in our application, the physical elements of training type suggested can be a central basis on which cross-cultural learnings can be drawn from. This cultural extension is a response to Tung's (2008) advocacy for knowledge in global cultures, especially in understudied areas. IB requires a varied curriculum that reflects the complexity of contextual features of global organising processes (Bjerregaard *et al.*, 2016).

Practically, the study suggests a plethora of management practices, expatriates' desired communication skills and cross-cultural learning which are critical for MNCs to adapt to successfully and efficiently transact their businesses in their subsidiary locations particularly in complex and multilingual environments like those of SSA. A second managerial implication is that management of MNCs should orientate expatriates to adopt values and behaviours of local staff in their subsidiaries to induce effective relationship and supportive cohabitation, which are hallmarks of teamwork between expatriates and local or indigenous staff. An effective multicultural team collaboration is a panacea for successful IB. Thus, MNCs ought to shift from the mere teaching of cultures to developing the skills of expatriates to be able to manage cross-cultures in the course of their career. The former simply draws attention on abstract

knowledge, whereas the latter strongly emphasises on developing expatriates' interpersonal skills and increasing their awareness about the importance of others.

Limitations and future research

Despite these contributions and implications, the study has a few limitations that can be improved upon in future. First, cross-cultural communication is assessed from the perspectives of a single country – Ghana – whilst the study looks at the impact of the study on the entire sub-Saharan African business environment. Nonetheless, this is a preliminary attempt to understand the cross-cultural phenomenon in SSA; thus future research should extend it to other countries in the subregion. Second, we focused only from the perspectives of the expatriates. The perspectives from the local staff could concurrently be investigated to offer a much more balance on the lessons to be learnt by Western expatriates on cross-cultural communication. Finally, we suggest and encourage an investigation of expatriates' cross-cultural communication through the use of a quantitative survey to embrace a larger number of expatriates across the subregion.

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Further reading

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