

How do Dutch expatriate leaders adapt their leadership style when managing teams in Nigeria?

Author: Lara Daalhuisen
University of Twente
P.O. Box 217, 7500AE Enschede
The Netherlands

ABSTRACT,

In the current global business environment, leading across cultures is becoming increasingly important. It is required from expatriate leaders to have the ability to adapt their leadership styles to different regions and teams with members from various nationalities. This thesis explores how Dutch expatriate leaders adapt their leadership style when managing teams in Nigeria. By using a qualitative and emic-based approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews among five Dutch expatriate leaders working in various sectors in Nigeria. Key themes that emerged include the importance of hierarchical structures, communication norms, work ethic, advanced planning, the impact of expatriate identity and cultural sensitivity. The findings show that core Dutch values, such as direct communication and servant leadership, remain intact. Adaption takes place in terms of hierarchical structures, exhibiting power, the embracement of a more flexible approach to planning and the influence of expatriate identity on workplace dynamics and perceived authority. This research contributes to the literature on cross-cultural leadership by providing a targeted investigation of the underexplored Dutch and Nigerian leadership values and challenges, offering valuable recommendations and insights for Dutch leaders preparing for or currently in expatriate assignments in Nigeria.

Graduation Committee members: Dr. Arnold Enklaar & Dr. Rashimah Rajah

Keywords

Cross-cultural leadership, Nigeria, the Netherlands, Dutch expatriates, Leadership adaption, Cultural differences, Leadership style

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current global business environment, leading across cultures is becoming increasingly important. It is expected from expatriate leaders to have the ability to adapt their leadership styles to different regions and teams with members from various nationalities (Tsai, 2022). This adaptability is crucial, as successful organizations often depend on strong and effective leadership in order to achieve their strategic goals (Schuetz, 2016).

A clear example of the growing importance of intercultural leadership can be seen in the economic relationship between the Netherlands and Nigeria. Nigeria is currently one of Africa's largest economies and fastest-growing markets and has increasing trade relations with the Netherlands, mostly in the areas of oil and gas (Eke et al., 2014). This is partially due to the Dutch multinational company Shell that has been operating in Nigeria for decades. In the future, trade relations are expected to grow due to long-term commitment and increases in investments (Shell Nigeria, 2025). It is likely that the number of Dutch expatriates assigned to Nigeria will increase in the upcoming years. Despite this deep economic engagement there are to our knowledge no studies comparing the business cultures of the Netherlands and Nigeria.

Existing research on expatriate leadership is focused on a broad and global perspective of research, following a quantitative and etic approach. These studies focus on entire regions, such as Asia or Africa, while using large datasets. Furthermore, they are often focused on expatriate leaders who are native English speakers. The study of etic approaches is prevalent in cross-cultural leadership research, where the focus is on universal leadership principles across all cultures (Dickson et al., 2003). In contrast, this research will explore the Netherlands and Nigeria as distinct cultural contexts, aiming to generate deeper insight into their unique values and leadership approaches and to enable a more accurate and precise cross-cultural comparison between the two countries.

This study aims to examine the cultural and leadership differences between the Netherlands and Nigeria and will follow a qualitative, emic-based approach. By combining the existing theoretical frameworks together with qualitative interviews conducted with Dutch leaders who are managing Nigerian teams, this research provides both an academic and practical contribution. Academically, it advances the understanding of cross-cultural leadership adaption in a specific and under-researched context. Practically, it offers valuable guidance for Dutch leaders currently in or preparing for assignments in Nigeria.

1.1 Research question

The main research question for this study is:

How do Dutch expatriate leaders adapt their leadership style when managing teams in Nigeria?

This main question can be split up in the following sub questions:

- What are the key differences between Dutch and Nigerian leadership styles?
- How do Dutch expatriate leaders adapt their leadership style to effectively manage teams in Nigeria?

1.2 Academic relevance

Existing research relies on broad regional comparisons with datasets of participants with native English-speaking backgrounds (Dickson et al., 2003). This has led to a lack of targeted research on the leadership experiences of specific non-anglophone groups, such as Dutch expatriates in Nigeria. This study offers a meaningful contribution to the academic literature on international leadership and cross-cultural management. It narrows its scope to the underexplored Dutch-Nigerian context and addresses a gap in existing literature regarding Dutch expatriate leadership in Nigeria. An emic lens is applied to understand cultural complexities and the allowing of an in-depth exploration of personal experiences and challenges.

1.3 Practical relevance

The findings of this study are highly relevant to Dutch organizations operating internationally, especially in Nigeria. It offers real and empirical insights that can help expatriate training programs with the preparation of future leaders and the cultural challenges that may arise. Understanding, adjusting and comparing the Nigerian and Dutch leadership approaches lead to the knowledge of making stronger, more motivated and better working teams. Leading to a higher effective, efficiency and success rate (Kan, 2024).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the following section the concept of culture that is used will be defined. Next the literature about Nigerian culture and leadership will be treated, followed by a discussion of literature on Dutch culture and leadership, after which the two will be compared.

2.1 Culture

In this study for culture the definition of Spencer-Oatey (2012) will be used: "Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour." (Spencer-Oatey, 2012, p.2). Culture is not something you are born with, it is framed as something that is being learned from your environment and shaped through social interaction (Spencer-Oatey, 2012).

Culture can be studied from an etic or emic perspective. An etic perspective takes the viewpoint of an outsider, meaning that cultures are being assessed by using a standard universal

framework. With an emic perspective the focus lies on the insider's view (Harris, 1976).

According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the Netherlands exhibits low power distance, with a strong focus on egalitarianism and the decentralisation of decision-making (Hofstede Insight, 2025). Nigeria on the other hand displays a high power distance, mainly focussing on hierarchical structures (Thetsane et al., 2024).

There is a lack of more detailed and emic based studies directly comparing Nigerian and Dutch workplace cultures. Therefore, first will be discussed studies about Nigerian culture and leadership and after that about Dutch culture and leadership. Lastly, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the key cultural and leadership differences between the two nations, they will be compared.

2.2 Nigeria and Nigerian culture

With being home to over 250 ethnic groups, 237 million inhabitants and having more than 500 spoken languages, Nigeria is one of the most culturally varied nations in the world. As a result of British colonization, the official language spoken is English (LibreText, 2021).

All of these ethnic groups have their own highly ingrained traditions, religions and social systems. In the Northern part, the Hausa-Fulani has the most political influence. This influence focuses on Islamic traditions, where men hold more authority. Major cities like Lagos and Ibadan, located in the southwestern regions, are dominated by the Yoruba. This is a group that is religiously diverse. A significant amount still adheres to traditional Yoruba religious beliefs, while other practice Christianity or Islam. (LibreText, 2021). In the more southeastern areas, the Igbo traditionally govern their communities with leaders made up of respected elders. They embraced Christianity and their leadership is mostly based on achievement and ability, not necessarily on family background (LibreText, 2021). These religious distinctions tend to have the ability to influence leadership styles and team dynamics. Understanding and reacting to these nuances is critical to develop effective cross-cultural and cohesive management teams.

Despite all of the diversity aspects the country is facing, some broad cultural patterns are relevant for all businesses across the country, especially in terms of communication, the interpersonal relationships and most importantly what is being expected of leaders (Amos et al, 2014).

2.3 Nigerian leadership

The leadership styles in Nigeria are shaped by a convergence between historical, cultural and organizational factors. Leaders maintain strict control over the procedures and policies that need to be followed or executed. There is a limited to zero amount of input from subordinates. According to both Owotemu et al. (2024) and Ibrahim et al. (2020) long-standing cultural traditions and political factors in Nigeria fail the development of a more effective leadership style. As a result,

collaboration, innovation and employee-driven growth are limited, due to a lack of encouragement of initiatives. Owotemu et al. (2024), adopts an etic perspective with a quantitative methodology, emphasizing how the systemic issues, such as corruption, limit the efficiency of leadership.

In the strong community values, where hierarchy is respected, it is very common to use proverbs, to guide behaviour through indirect communication and culturally embedded wisdom. (Aderinto, 2014). The leaders are expected to be authoritative, but approachable. This indicates that employees are in need to remain silent during group meetings, but are comfortable enough to share their thoughts in a private conversation with their manager. This links to the indirect communication style and the need of managers to show strength in decision-making, while maintaining a visible moral compass.

Nigerians tend to value traditions and quick results. They live in the moment and score low in terms of Long-Term Orientation of Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede Insight, 2025). Promoting organizational discipline, personal accountability and ethical behaviour are important in decreasing inefficiency and corruption. These issues are currently reducing the effectiveness of the Nigerian leadership style (Attahiru, 2022).

2.4 Dutch culture

The Dutch culture is being characterised by direct communication styles, individualism and egalitarianism. The direct communication style is coupled with a pragmatic approach to problem-solving and there is a widely held belief that all individuals should be treated with fairness and equality, regardless of their gender, background or socio-economic status (ProDemos, 2014).

According to Enklaar (2007), there are three values and especially the combination of these three values that set the Dutch culture apart from most other cultures around the world: consensus, equality and self-determination. The table presented below outlines these values and additional, albeit less specific, characteristics of Dutch culture (Enklaar, 2007).

Christian values	Typifying view
1. Salvation	If only we make the right choices, a happy future awaits for us
2. Guilt	You must acknowledge your guilt/responsibility for your mistakes/actions
3. Charity	What you do not want to happen to you, do not do that to another
4. Truth	You must always speak the truth (even if that is painful)
Weberian values	
5. Order and tidiness	You need to have your affairs in order
6. Labor	Labor is good
7. Usefulness	Everything you do must yield something (so not merely for pleasure)
8. Reliability	You must keep your promises
9. Moderation	You must control yourself
Dutch values	
10. Consensus	You have to find a way to work it out together
11. Equality	You must not think that you are better than another
12. Self-determination	Everyone must decide for themselves what they do (as long as I'm not bothered by it)

Table 1: The Dutch values and characteristics (Enklaar, 2007)

Dutch society is characterized by minimal social and class distinctions, accompanied by low levels of income inequality. The communication style is direct, which can be implemented by outsiders as blunt or even rude. Individuals are encouraged to form their own opinions and make their own decisions, which they are not afraid to express. In this cultural context, respect is not derived from hierarchical status, but from authenticity and contribution. Arising conflicts are typically resolved by consensus and compromise, as unilateral decision-making is generally discouraged. Teamwork and collaborative decision-making are there for encouraged (Enklaar, 2007).

The Netherlands is one of the most secular countries in Europe. Meaning that laws are not based on religious rules and there is no state religion. According to Statistics Netherlands (CBS), more than fifty percent of the Dutch population identifies as non-religious. Within the religious community, the Roman Catholic Church remains the largest, accounting for around twenty percent of the population (CBS, 2021).

2.5 Dutch leadership

The Dutch leadership style is characterized by an egalitarian approach, is very consensus driven with direct communication styles, and the fostering of self-determination among team members. Research by Den Hartog et al. (1997), has shown that transformational or inspirational leadership is indeed found in

the Netherlands. An emphasis on the importance of these dimensions for outstanding leadership is therefore expected for the Dutch managers (Den Hartog et al., 1997).

By prioritizing the needs of their team members, showing empathy and having a good collaboration, servant leadership is a main part of the Dutch leadership style. Moral leaderships styles, such as servant leadership, are becoming way more important due to the high valuation of being sustainable. By shifting the leaders goal to serving others instead of gaining power and control, the needs of their teams are being prioritized (Canavesi et al.,2022).

The study from Van Dierendonck et al. (2011), supports the prevalence of servant leadership within Dutch organizations. Servant leadership is characterized by leaders who intend to prioritize the needs of their employees, while valuing an environment of trust, empathy and collaboration. This leadership style aligns perfectly with the Dutch values of egalitarianism and consensus-building. Leaders are seen as guides rather than authoritative figures (Van Dierendonck et al., 2011).

2.6 Dutch and Nigerian leadership

The leadership styles of Dutch and Nigerian cultures differ significantly due to underlying cultural values and social norms. These differences have substantial implications for Dutch expatriate leaders managing teams in Nigeria.

Figure 1, presented below, visualizes these differences using Hofstede's cultural dimensions. For example, the Netherlands exhibits low power distance, with a strong focus on egalitarianism and the decentralisation of decision-making. Nigeria on the other hand displays a high power distance, mainly focussing on hierarchical structures. (Hofstede Insight, 2025).

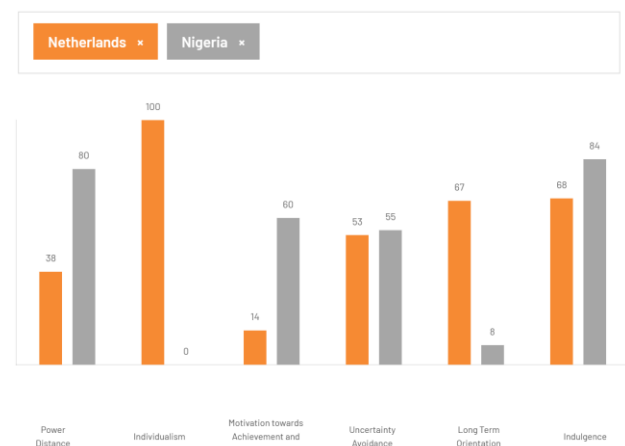


Figure 1: Hofstede's Insight Cultural Dimensions (Hofstede Insight, 2025)

According to Douborapade Peretomode (2012), Nigeria scores low on the Long-Term Orientation dimension. This indicates that approaches have a short-term focus, where quick results are being prioritized (Douborapade Peretomode, 2012). The Netherlands on the other hand scores a lot higher. This suggests

that sustainable growth and long-term planning are being valued, which will lead to long-term successes and growth.

In the table below the differences between Dutch and Nigerian leadership styles are being highlighted in an easy and well-organized form.

Aspect	Dutch leadership style	Nigerian leadership style
Power distance	Low – emphasis on equality and flat structures	High – strong respect for authority and status
Individualism	High – emphasis on personal responsibility and autonomy	Very low
Motivation towards achievement and success	Achievement-oriented – emphasis on performance	Status- and relationship-oriented – success linked to community status
Orientation	Long Term	Short term
Communication style	Direct – open and honest communication	Indirect – use of metaphors
Religious influence	Low	High
Decision-making	Consensus-driven	Top-down – leaders make decisions unilaterally
Hierarchy	Egalitarian – leaders are seen as part of the team	Hierarchical – clear chain of command
Team involvement	High	Low
Expectations of leaders	Servant and transformational – leaders are focussing on employee growth and team needs	Authoritative, but approachable – leaders must show moral strength and the maintaining of control

Table 2: Differences between Dutch and Nigerian leadership styles

These cultural distinctions influence leadership effectiveness. Nigerian leadership is shaped by strong traditional values and is challenged by issues such as corruption, which can effect decision-making and team dynamics (Amos et al., 2014). In contrast, Dutch leaders are more frequently present in a multicultural environment. In that case being able to lead diverse teams successfully is very important.

While Dutch leaders tend to inspire by vision and openness (Mihai, 2015), it is important for the Nigerian leaders to gain

respect through authority. In this way charismatic leadership plays a significant role in both cultures.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter the study's research design is outlined. It provides an overview of the research context and explains the methods used for data collection. In addition, it details the procedures followed during the data analysis process.

3.1 Research design

This research uses a case study methodology to gain deep, context-specific insights. A qualitative and emic-based approach was adopted to explore how Dutch expatriate leaders adapt their leadership style in Nigeria. This will allow for a nuanced understanding of leadership behaviours in a culturally complex environment, capturing subtle perspectives that broader, more general quantitative studies may overlook.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with five Dutch expatriate leaders who are either currently working or have previously worked in Nigeria and have experience with managing teams. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, because they offer a perfect balance between structure and flexibility. All interviews were conducted in Dutch to ensure a comfortable and natural environment for the interviewees and interviewer to speak in. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. This particular type of sampling is often used in qualitative studies to select participants who possess relevant knowledge or experience directly related to the research topic. This type of sampling can be narrowed down to the specific purposive sampling methods of homogeneous sampling and expert sampling. Homogeneous sampling, because the interviewees are similar in age, have a Dutch nationality and all work in leadership positions. Expert sampling, because the interviewees are all professional experts in the Nigerian work environment and familiar with the leading and organizing of teams (Etikan et al., 2016).

The sample consisted of five professionals across different sectors. The interviews focused on leadership practices, perceived cultural challenges, adaptation strategies and reflections on leadership effectiveness and lasted between 45-60 minutes. Participants were required to be Dutch, to have held a leadership role in managing local teams, to have lived and worked in Nigeria for a minimum of six months, and both male and female participants were considered to capture a more balanced perspective. Participants were recruited through personal connections. An overview of the interviewees' demographic information is presented in Table 3.

Interviewee number	Age	Gender	Years in Nigeria	Sector
1	51	Male	12	Financial Services
2	46	Male	9	Logistics
3	51	Male	10	Renewable energy
4	45	Male	3	Logistics & Shipping
5	x	Female	20	Trade Facilitation

Table 3: Interviewees' demographic information

After the interviews were completed, the data was transcribed and analysed using Thematic Analysis based on the method from Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79). This method aimed to identify and examine patterns in the data and was conducted following an inductive coding approach, meaning that patterns were derived from the data itself. The interviewees were voice recorded, purely with the intention of transcription. All data were anonymized to protect participants' identities, adhered to ethical research standards and will be permanently destroyed in every way after the thesis deadline. Given the small and non-random sample, the results of this research may not be generalizable to all expatriate leadership contexts and this was acknowledged as a limitation.

4. RESULTS

This chapter presents the key findings of the qualitative research conducted among five Dutch expatriate leaders working in Nigeria. The data, gathered through semi-structured interviews, has a central focus on understanding how Dutch leadership styles are adapted to effectively manage teams within the Nigerian cultural and organizational context. These themes relate to hierarchical structures, cultural sensitivity, communication style, motivation, work ethic, planning culture and expatriate identity. Direct quotes from participants are included to illustrate each theme.

4.1 Hierarchical structures and cultural sensitivity

Participants noted the contrast between the flat, consensus-driven Dutch working culture and the deeply hierarchical structures present in Nigerian organizations. Nigerian employees often show deep respect for seniority and authority through titles, body language and race. Interviewee 5 quoted: *'Even though people are allowed to use my first name, many still prefer to address me as Chief'. It is a sign of respect here.*' (Interviewee 5). Followed by Interviewee 1 addressing: *'People don't dare to go home earlier than their boss. For example, I saw a boss stay until 10 p.m., and then the whole department would stay until 10 as well.'* (Interviewee 1). Leaders needed to become comfortable with these expressions and adapt a more authoritative presence than they were used to in the Netherlands. Even attempts to remove hierarchical boundaries

were often met with discomfort: *'When I want to make a decision, I sometimes ask for input from others. But it's like I need to stand next to them with a chainsaw saying, 'Give me something!''* (Interviewee 4). Despite this hierarchical dynamic, leaders found ways to remain approachable. Interviewees emphasized the importance of personal relationships and cultural sensitivity. Interviewee 5 explained: *'Stay true to your own Western values, but make sure you also have local understanding and empathy for your team and their beliefs.'* (Interviewee 5). These insights suggest that successful leadership in Nigeria is not only based on managerial adaptability, but also on cultural awareness and respect for local norms. To elaborate on this, Interviewee 1 noted the influence of religion on the workplace, especially for Christians: *'Faith plays an important role. If you want, you can even start the morning by praying together and you also need to take into account the ethnic groups within your team. If a manager is Yoruba, then everyone in his team will also be Yoruba. He will help his own people.'* (Interviewee 1).

4.2 Communication style

Nigerian employees are generally receptive to the direct communication style, a trait that is often associated with Dutch leadership styles. While managers tend to be direct towards their employees, the employees are not necessarily expected to communicate as directly in return. Interviewee 4 emphasized: *'Direct feedback works very well here. If you are clear and specific, they will not get offended. In fact, they often come back even more motivated the next day.'* (Interviewee 4). This sentiment was echoed by Interviewee 3: *'Nigerians are the Dutch of Africa. They are very direct, not afraid to speak up, and can take criticism.'* (Interviewee 3). These findings indicate that communicative norms are culturally compatible, Dutch leaders are able to retain their direct communication style without causing conflict or offense.

4.3 Motivation and work ethic

The great degree of motivation and ambition among Nigerian employees is another recurrent theme. All participants expressed admiration for their team members' drive for personal development and commitment to work. Interviewee 5 stated: *'The average Nigerian is a lot more ambitious than the average Dutch person and much more open to learning. They are always working on getting new certificates and pursuing additional training.'* (Interviewee 5). Followed up with a concrete example: *'They always give more than you actually expect. People easily work overtime, and you won't hear complaints like, Its 5 PM, I'm done for the day.'* (Interviewee 5). Leaders also point out that this motivation can sometimes mask a need for supervision. Interviewee 4 explained that even though they are highly motivated, it does not always translate into structure: *'Sometimes you really do need to micromanage. You have to check things and follow up.'* (Interviewee 4).

4.4 Planning culture

One area where interviewees noted challenges was in planning and structured execution. While Nigerian employees were frequently described as highly motivated and capable of

exceptional performance under pressure, several interviewees noted that proactive planning, task ownership, and long-term time management were underdeveloped relative to Dutch expectations. Interviewee 3 highlighted the fact: *'In the period between five to and five past twelve, an incredible amount of work can still be done. That's truly remarkable, and you would never see that happen in the Netherlands. But it also means that people don't plan, and there's generally less planning overall.'* (Interviewee 3). This statement is further supported by Interviewee 1 stating: *'In the Netherlands, a meeting starts exactly on time. That is not the case here. Everything is much looser. Dutch culture is much more tightly scheduled.'* (Interviewee 1). Followed up by the statement of Interviewee 4: *'Unpredictable factors can have a major impact on leadership and running a business. Employees are also regularly late, which makes it difficult to schedule appointments.'* (Interviewee 4). It is important for Dutch leaders to adjust their expectations regarding scheduling, adopting more flexible time lines and developing contingency strategies to accommodate this improvisational work culture.

4.5 Expatriate identity

Interviewees reflected on how their identity as being white expatriates influenced workplace dynamics and the way they are seen by local employees. Interviewee 5 observed: *'It's a form of positive discrimination that I am white. You are more likely to be seen as trustworthy and honest.'* (Interviewee 5). Echoed by Interviewee 1 stating: *'I'm immediately regarded more highly because I'm white. That's what you call white privilege.'* (Interviewee 1). This unintended status advantage places a responsibility on expatriate leaders to remain mindful of how their identity is perceived and how it affects team dynamics. It is important that Dutch expatriate leaders stay aware of the influences that their identity and status has on local employees and the influence it might have on managing teams and the shaping of daily routines. Interviewee 1 explained: *'This morning, my driver brought me here. In the Netherlands, I usually don't talk about that, because people would think, who do you think you are?'* (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 2 followed up with: *'I get addresses as 'white boss' and when I walk in, people nod and bow.'* (Interviewee 2). These experiences demonstrate how perceived status has an influence on the hierarchical structure between leaders and their teams, even unintentionally. To manage this impression it requires humility and conscious efforts from leaders to empower local staff. Despite the elevated status often granted to expatriates, interviewees also admitted that this does not automatically guarantee trust or loyalty from local employees. Interviewee 2 recounted: *'I worked with someone for six or seven years, and still he ended up stealing money. Then I thought, why would you do that.'* (Interviewee 2). These kind of incidents highlight the importance of maintaining clear oversight and internal control systems. Even while many Nigerian employees have a strong level of motivation and work ethic, expatriate leaders need to stay aware of the structural vulnerabilities associated with corruption that currently has a negative effect on the country and its work environment. Interviewee 2 highlights how corruption affects the work environment: *'When it comes to*

trust, things can be a bit uncertain in Nigeria. Our local staff are paid weekly instead of monthly. In that way, I can be sure they'll show up again on Monday.' (Interviewee 2).

5. DISCUSSION

This chapter reflects on the research key findings by comparing them with the theoretical framework and existing literature. The aim is to evaluate how Dutch expatriate leaders' real-world experiences relate to or differ from existing academic literature on cross-cultural leadership within the Dutch-Nigerian leadership context.

5.1 Adapting to hierarchical structures

One of the most notable themes to emerge from the interviews was the strong hierarchical orientation of Nigerian workplaces, which contrasts sharply with the egalitarian, consensus-driven Dutch leadership style. This aligns with Hofstede's dimensions, which categorizes Nigeria as a high power distance culture and the Netherlands as a low power distance society (Thetsane et al., 2024). Dutch leaders reported needing to adapt to a more authoritative presence due to the deeply emphasized Nigerians have for status and authority, even if this conflicted with their own cultural instincts. By balancing authority and approachability, interviewees were able to bridge the gap by demonstrating cultural sensitivity. This emphasizes the relevance of Tsai's (2022) claim that expatriate leaders must be able to modify their leadership styles to succeed in diverse cultural settings (Tsai, 2022). According to the results, a key component of effective leadership in Nigeria is the ability to respect hierarchical expectations while at the same time maintaining the principle of authenticity.

5.2 Communication norms

Interestingly, while the study of Aderinto (2014) suggest that Nigerian communication tends to be indirect, especially within hierarchical settings (Aderinto, 2014), the findings of this study presented a different outcome. Dutch leaders reported that the Dutch directness and constructive feedback was generally well received by Nigerian employees. When the direct feedback is delivered constructively, it is often led to improved motivation and performance among team members. This similarity allowed Dutch leaders to maintain an essential part of their native leadership style, minimizing the need for adjustment in this domain. The observation by Interviewee 3 that 'Nigerians are the Dutch of Africa' captures this unexpected alignment.

5.3 Aligning work ethic with planning

All participants described Nigerian employees as motivated, ambitious and committed to their work. The Nigerian team members are often eager to pursue certification and professional development, featuring the strong drive to success. This supports the view of Attahiru (2022) that while corruption can impact Nigerian workplaces, there is still strong individual drive for achievement and personal growth (Attahiru, 2022). However, Dutch leaders pointed out the gap between motivation and structured execution, especially in time management and

planning. Confirming Hofstede's identification of Nigeria as a short-term oriented culture (Douborapade Peretomode, 2012). The Dutch emphasis on long-term planning and structure is in big contrast with the more improvisational and flexible approach observed in Nigeria. Leaders are expected to adjust their expectations around time, scheduling and planning. *'If things do not go as you expected, don't stress. It will all work out in the end.'* (Interviewee 1).

5.4 Expatriate identity and privilege

The expatriate identity emerges as a new central theme in shaping workplace dynamics and directly influences how Dutch expatriate leaders adapt their leadership style in Nigeria. While not being extensively addressed in the traditional leadership literature, the experiences shared by interviewees affirm that race and perceived foreignness might have an unintentional influence on the organizational hierarchy. For instance, being perceived as a 'white boss' leads to a higher initial trust or deference. However, this initial trust based on appearance and status does not automatically translate into genuine loyalty from employees and team cohesion. Interviewees emphasized that it is important for the Dutch leaders to adapt their leadership style by remaining humble and actively empowering local staff. This approach aligns with the concept of Van Dierendonck et al. (2011), where the importance of servant leadership is being highlighted. Simultaneously, leaders must remain aware of the possibility of corruption and structural vulnerabilities. This observation focuses on the fact that traditions, beliefs and structural inefficiencies have an effect on the management of teams. *'It is crucial for leaders to stay true to their own Western values, while showing local understanding and empathy for their team and their beliefs at the same time.'* (Interviewee 5).

5.5 Theoretical implications

This research offers several theoretical contributions to cross-cultural leadership literature by exploring how Dutch expatriate leaders adapt their leadership style within the Nigerian workplace.

To start, the study supports Hofstede's framework in terms of differences in power distance, confirming that Nigerian workplaces tend to be more hierarchical compared to the egalitarian Dutch approach (Hofstede Insights, 2025). However, the framework is also being challenged by revealing unexpected compatibilities. For example, the unexpected effectiveness of the Dutch direct communication style and the Nigerian employees receptiveness to clear feedback. This implies that even though with the Hofstede's framework a strong foundation is being provided, the model might not take in to account all cultural dimensions. That is why it's critical for Dutch leaders to see the model as a general guide rather than a rigorous description of cross-cultural relationships.

In addition, the findings refine the concept of adaption by showing that expatriate leaders do not fully abandon their own leadership style. According to the interviewees, Dutch values like servant leadership and consensus are blended with Nigerian expectations, such as hierarchy and authority. The importance

of balancing authenticity with cultural sensitivity is through this being highlighted.

Following from that, this study briefly introduces an important coincidental finding: the effect of expatriate identity on team management. Dutch expatriate leaders report that they are automatically granted a higher status based solely on their racial identity and foreignness. This finding supports Liu et al. (2021) argument for broader theoretical consideration of expatriates' social identities within international leadership contexts. The systematic literature review highlights that the cultural and ethnic identity of expatriates influences how they are treated and perceived in host country environments. Race and foreignness tend to affect workplace dynamics and leadership effectiveness in ways that extend beyond national cultural differences, revealing limitations in traditional cultural frameworks, such as Hofstede's dimensions. These findings demonstrate the need for leadership theories to go beyond culture alone and incorporate identity and power structures in their frameworks. In this way it becomes possible to more accurately explain leadership adaptation and team dynamics in cross-cultural settings.

Lastly, by using an emic and qualitative based approach, this research highlights and clarifies the importance of context-specific insights and personal experiences. Adding nuance and depth to broader etic models and existing literature and frameworks, such as Hofstede's framework.

5.6 Practical implications

This research provides crucial practical insights for Dutch expatriate leaders currently working in or interested in assignments in Nigeria. Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to enhance the cross-cultural leadership effectiveness.

Initially, it is important that leaders learn to adapt to the hierarchical nature of Nigerian workplaces. Nigerian employees often expect visible authority and respect for rank (Hofstede Insights, 2025). This is in big contrast with the Dutch leadership style that tends to focus on an egalitarian approach, where equal contribution in decision-making processes is being encouraged. This gap can be bridged by Dutch leaders by maintaining an authoritative presence through clear decision-making and visible leadership, while also fostering approachability by building personal relationships and showing genuine interest in team members' lives and values (Interviewee 5). This will allow them to gain respect without abandoning the Dutch emphasis on openness and empathy (Van Dierendonck et al., 2011) and aligns perfectly with the concept of paternalistic leadership explained in the study of Farh et al. (2000) where the focus lies on combining strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence and moral integrity.

Secondly, even though Nigerian culture is traditionally associated with indirect communication styles (Aderinto, 2014), according to both Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 4 the Dutch expatriate leaders are able to retain their direct communication style. Nigerian employees generally appreciate the honest and

clear feedback, as long as it is delivered respectfully and constructively.

Following, all interviewees described Nigerian teams as highly motivated and eager to work hard, but that they may have limited experiences with structured planning and time management (Interviewee 1, interviewee 2, interviewee 3, interviewee 4 and interviewee 5). That is why it is expected from Dutch leaders to provide Nigerian employees with clear guidance, consistent follow-ups and a contribution in creating a more organized work environment. However, this should be done with the aim of leaders remaining humble, ensuring that the focus is being held on empowering local employees, while at the same time staying conscious of how their expatriate identity (including race and perceived foreignness) may have an impact on team dynamics and perceptions of authority (Liu et al., 2021).

Finally, challenges that arise for Dutch leaders could be mitigated through better preparation in the form of pre-departure training. The expatriate training programs should be improved by including specific cultural preparation for Nigeria. This includes the understanding of religious influences, leadership expectations of local staff, the affect this may have on the work floor and structural barriers, such as corruption. This aligns with the study of Okpara et al. (2022) about Western expatriates in Nigeria. They stated that the ineffectiveness from expatriates to adapt to the host-country's culture is partly due to the lack of cross-cultural training. By applying these recommendations it becomes possible for Dutch companies to better support and prepare their expatriate leaders, stimulating a smoother integration and increasing the chance of leadership effectiveness.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

This research provides insightful information about the cross-cultural examination of Dutch expatriate leaders based in Nigeria. However, it has several limitations and promising directions for further investigation.

6.1 Limitations

To start with the sample size of the interviewees. Currently, a small sample size of five interviewees, selected through personal connections, was conducted. This specific sample size limits the ability to generalize the findings and might have introduced bias into the research, indicating that the findings may not accurately represent the broader and full population of Dutch expatriate leaders in Nigeria. The focus that this research has on solely Dutch expatriates in Nigeria means that broader expatriate experiences, such as those of leaders from different national backgrounds or leaders operating in other African host countries, are not taken into consideration. This restricts and influences the generalizability of the findings and their applicability for diverse international contexts.

Moreover, the findings are only based on the perspectives and interpretations of Dutch expatriate leaders, meaning that the input and experiences from Nigerian employees are not being reported. This creates a research with a limited and one-sided perspective, as it does not capture how Nigerian employees perceive leadership practices, communication styles and team dynamics from their own point of view.

Additionally, since the majority of the interviewees worked in professional or corporate sectors, the findings may reflect to sector-specific factors rather than universally applicable cross-cultural leadership experiences.

6.2 Future research recommendations

Considering the exploratory character of this study and the given limitations mentioned above, this research points to several promising directions for further investigation.

Initially, future research could benefit from including a wider and more varied group of interviewees to conduct results from. Specifically, not only in terms of broaden its focus from solely Dutch expatriate leaders to expatriates from other non-Anglophone countries, but also by incorporating the perspectives and voices of Nigerian employees. In this way it would be possible to even further extended to an comparative analysis of expatriate experiences across different African host countries and will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural leadership and the experience and interpretation from diverse perspectives.

Moreover, future research could explore the unexpected and underexplored finding of expatriate identity, such as race and status, and the influence that it has on shaping workplace dynamics.

7. CONCLUSION

This study explored how Dutch expatriate leaders adapt their leadership style when working with Nigerian teams. The main research question was:

'How do Dutch expatriate leaders adapt their leadership style when managing teams in Nigeria?'

To tackle this question, a qualitative and emic-based approach was used. Through the conduction of five semi-structured interviews with Dutch expatriate leaders who have experience in leading teams in Nigeria, this research examined how they manage cultural differences in leadership expectations, communication styles, hierarchy and work ethic. The findings reveal that Dutch expatriate leaders adapt by combining their Dutch native values, such as direct communication, servant leadership and egalitarianism, with the original Nigerian work expectations of hierarchy, authority and the process of remaining flexible. It is important for Dutch expatriate leaders to stay approachable, while at the same time being aware of how their expatriate identity influences team dynamics. Introducing the topic of paternalistic leadership. To improve organizational effectiveness and successes, it is required from

leaders to provide structure, micromanaging and remaining culturally sensitive. Leading in Nigeria after all is not about changing who you are, but about learning how to adapt to where you are.

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10. APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Kunt u kort uw functie en verantwoordelijkheden in Nigeria beschrijven?
2. Hoe lang werkt u (of heeft u gewerkt) in Nigeria, en in welke sector?
3. Wat zijn de verschillen met het leiden van een Nigeriaans team in vergelijking met een Nederlands team? Hoe gaat u om met die verschillen?
4. Op welke manieren heeft u uw leiderschapsstijl aangepast bij het aansturen van Nigeriaanse teams?
5. Wat is het mooiste aan werken met een Nigeriaans team? En wat is het moeilijkste?
6. Kunt u een specifiek voorbeeld geven van een situatie waarin u uw gebruikelijke leiderschapsaanpak moest veranderen?
7. Hoe gaat u om met feedback, deadlines, initiatief van teamleden, fouten toegeven en het betrekken van teams bij besluitvorming? Heeft u ooit een conflict gehad? Hoe is dat opgelost?
8. Wat zijn de grootste leiderschapsuitdagingen geweest die u in Nigeria bent tegengekomen, en hoe heeft u deze aangepakt of overwonnen?
9. Welke culturele verschillen heeft u opgemerkt tussen de Nederlandse en Nigeriaanse werkomgeving?
10. Hoe heeft u communicatie en besluitvorming binnen uw team georganiseerd?
11. Welk advies zou u geven aan andere Nederlandse leiders die zich voorbereiden op een opdracht in Nigeria?
12. In hoeverre hanteren uw Nigeriaanse collega's een andere leiderschapsstijl dan u? Heeft u een Nigeriaanse collega die een goede leider is, maar een heel andere stijl heeft dan u?

11. APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Interview No.	Topic	Quotation
1	Expatriate identity	‘Ik ben vanochtend gewoon door mijn chauffeur hierheen gebracht. In Nederland hou ik meestal mijn mond erover, want dan denken ze, wat heb je? Wat heb jij het zo hoog in je bol.’
1	Hierarchical structures	‘Als iemand maar een streepje voorligt, misschien met een diploma of qua leeftijd of met een rang, dan voelt hij zich al meer dan een ander.’
1	Communication style / hierarchical structures	‘Hier is het zo dat als de baas wat zegt, dan is dat waar. Iemand die lager zit hoor je eigenlijk niet. Ze vinden het fijner als ik ze directief aanstuur, dat voelt heel veilig aan voor ze.’
1	Communication style	‘Daardoor merk je dat in dit land heel veel dingen gewoon niet goed gaan, omdat mensen niet durven te communiceren.’
1	Hierarchical structures	‘Mensen durven niet eerder naar huis te gaan dan hun baas. Dan zag ik bijvoorbeeld dat een baas bleef tot 10 uur s ’avonds, dan bleef de hele afdeling tot 10 uur. En weet je wat ze dan deden, dan waren ze aan het slapen. Omdat ze niet eerder naar huis durfde te gaan, want hun baas zal iets aan ze kunnen vragen dat er nog iets gedaan moest worden. Als jij er niet bent en hij wil wat aan je vragen, dan ben je gewoon je baan kwijt.’
1	Communication style	‘Door te communiceren met elkaar en gewoon in een rechte lijn van A naar B te gaan. Dat is heel Nederlands en kan doordat je gewoon open communiceert.’
1	Planning culture	‘In Nederland begint een meeting precies op tijd. Dat is hier niet. Het is allemaal veel losser, Nederland is zo strak afgesteld.’
1	Mutual adaption	‘Als het niet loopt zoals je verwacht had, schiet dan niet in de stress, het komt uiteindelijk wel goed.’
1	Cultural sensitivity	‘Als een leiding gevende Yoruba is, dan is iedereen in zijn team ook Yoruba. Hij gaat zijn eigen mensen helpen.’
1	Cultural sensitivity	‘Geloof speelt een belangrijke rol, als je wilt kan je s ’ochtends met elkaar gaan bidden.’
1	Expatriate identity	‘Ik word gelijk hoger ingeschat, omdat ik wit ben. White privilege noem je dat.’
2	Expatriate identity / cultural sensitivity	‘Toen ik voor het eerst thuis kwam van, we hebben een uitdaging in Nigeria klaar liggen, werd dat niet meteen heel erg enthousiast ontvangen, want er is nog al een stereotype wat veel mensen hebben.’

2	Hierarchical structure / expatriate identity	‘Ik word aangesproken met blanke baas en als ik binnenkom word er toch wel geknikt en gebogen.’
2	Communication style / trust	‘Eigen initiatief komt eigenlijk niet naar voren, omdat ze bang zijn dat ze daardoor te kritisch overkomen en wellicht hun baan kunnen kwijtraken. Je moet ze echt stimuleren om duidelijk te maken dat je hun mening belangrijk vind. Het gevaar daarin steekt alleen dat als je mensen intern gaat opleiden, je daardoor je eigen concurrent creëert.’
2	Cultural sensitivity / communication style	‘Je hebt een taalbarrière. De gesproken taal is Engels, alleen als je met een gemiddelde Nigeriaan praat versta je er het eerste half uur niks van en dan heb je ook nog de talen die de Igbo, Hausa en Yoruba spreken.’
2	Planning culture	‘Ik heb s ’ochtends een lijstje van dingen die ik wil doen en aan het eind van de dag heb ik allemaal dingen gedaan, behalve die 10 dingen. Dit komt doordat je alles moet controleren en ontzettend flexibel moet zijn.’
2	Motivation	‘Het mooiste met werken met Nigerianen vind ik dat ze altijd vrolijk zijn. Ze maken er wat van, hoe slecht het ook gaat. God will provide, dus het komt goed.’
2	Corruption / trust	‘Daar heb ik 6-7 jaar mee gewerkt en dan toch geld jatten. Dan denk ik van Waarom nou?’
2	Work ethic / micromanagement	‘Ik moet er continu bovenop zitten.’
2	Trust / cultural sensitivity / corruption	‘Op het stukje vertrouwen komt het in Nigeria nog wel eens aan. Onze lokale staff krijgt per week betaald en niet per maand. Dan weet ik zeker dat ze er namelijk maandag weer zijn.’
2	Cultural sensitivity	Ik ben ooit gebeld dat een van mijn medewerkers een aap had meegenomen. Dan moet je gaan uitleggen dat in een fabriek waar voedsel word gemaakt dat niet kan. Dan word je aangekeken van man, waar maak je je druk om.’
3	Communication style	‘Nigerianen zijn de Nederlanders van Afrika. Ze zijn direct, niet op hun mondje gevallen en kunnen ook wel tegen een stootje.’
3	Planning culture	‘In de periode 5 voor 12 en 5 over 12 kan er nog ontzettend veel werk verzet worden. Dat is echt noemenswaardig en dat zal je echt niet in Nederland meemaken. Dit zorgt alleen wel ervoor dat ze niet plannen en dat er minder gepland word.’
3	Hierarchical structures	‘Als de CEO binnenkomt en die vraagt iets, dan weet ik dat mijn team alla minuut al het werk neerlegt en voor de CEO aan de gang gaat.’

3	Work ethic / micromanagement	‘De grootste uitdaging is constant je team moeten blijven aansturen. Als ik dingen opgeleverd krijg, dan krijg ik nooit ik heb dit of dit gedaan. Ik moet het allemaal zelf uitvinden.’
3	Motivation	‘Mensen zijn veel ondernemender, ook omdat ze moeten omdat ze gewoon niet genoeg verdienen.’
3	Work ethic	‘Het basisniveau van de medewerkers ligt lager, je zal dingen vaker moeten gaan herhalen. Er is een kennis en kunde verschil.’
4	Communication style / motivation	‘Directe feedback werkt hier heel goed. Als je duidelijk en concreet bent, raken ze niet beledigd. Sterker nog, ze komen de volgende dag vaak juist gemotiveerder terug.’
4	Work ethic	‘Je moet wel soms micro managen. Je moet dingen controleren en opvolgen.’
4	Communication style / work ethic	‘Je moet niet vaag doen en juist concreet, direct en eerlijk vertellen wat er verwacht word. Je moet erboven op zitten en zorgen dat ze niet verslappen.’
4	Communication style	‘Om een beslissing te nemen wil ik ook wel eens input van andere hebben. Dan moet je bijna met een soort kettingzaag naast ze gaan staan van Geef me ook wat.’
4	Planning culture	‘De onvoorspelbare factoren, kunnen de leiderschap en het leiden van een bedrijf heel erg beïnvloeden. Werknemers komen ook regelmatig te laat, waardoor afspraken maken moeilijk is.’
5	Communication style / motivation / work ethic	‘Nigerianen zijn soort van de Hollanders onder de Afrikanen, dus mensen zijn vrij direct, ze zijn een stuk ambitieuzer dan de gemiddelde Nederlander en staan ook veel meer open om te leren. Ze zijn altijd bezig met nieuwe certificaten halen en nieuwe opleidingen volgen.’
5	Work ethic / motivation	‘Ze geven altijd meer dan dat je eigenlijk verwacht. Mensen werken ook makkelijk over, er word dan ook niet geklaagd van nou, het is nu 5 uur, ik wil even niks meer doen.’
5	Work ethic	‘Je moet in het begin micro managen.’
5	Hierarchical structures	‘Bij veel Nigeriaanse bedrijven is het zo dat hoe meer je senior je bent, hoe meer je TV gaat kijken en iedereen voor je laat werken. Wij zijn wat dat betreft echt een niet standaard Nigeriaans bedrijf. Hoe meer senior je bent, hoe meer je moet doen’
5	Work ethic / motivation	‘Ik probeer geen e-mails te sturen in het weekend, dan weet ik dat ze gewoon weer gaan werken.’

5	Cultural sensitivity	‘De labour laws zijn heel zwak, dus als werknemer heb je weinig vrijheden en weinig zekerheden. Persoonlijk denk ik dat het in Nederland de andere kant is opgeschoten, daar is juist dat je als werkgever niks meer mag en niks meer kan.’
5	Expatriate identity / cultural sensitivity	‘Blijf trouw aan je eigen westerse waarden, maar zorg ook dat je lokaal begrip hebt en empathie voor je team en geloof.’
5	Expatriate identity / hierarchical structures	‘Het is een soort positieve discriminatie dat ik blank ben. Je word eerder als betrouwbaar en eerlijk gezien.’
5	Hierarchical structures	‘Hoewel mensen mijn voornaam mogen gebruiken, geven velen toch de voorkeur aan de aanspreektitel ‘Chief’. Dat is hier een teken van respect.’