



Cohesive cross-cultural teams begin
with savvy relationship management

The human touch

BY VICKI FLIER HUDSON

I discovered the key to successful cross-cultural project planning by accident. Five minutes before I began a class about India for a group of engineers, the head of the department pulled me aside.

“Listen,” he said, “I know this is short notice, but I wanted you to know something. We’re all engineers here. If you could stick to the facts — you know, practical stuff — that would be great. We don’t like the touchy-feely stuff.”

I nodded and tried to organize my thoughts at the speed of light. How was I supposed to tell him that another word for “touchy-feely stuff” is “relationships” and that they are the key to successful global project planning and efficiency? How could I express how practical relationship building can be?

What my client didn’t yet know was that the rules of project management have changed. Every industry is reinventing itself. Putting a group of people of the same culture or location together can be difficult. (Consider that even when people work in the same office suite, they may work together electronically rather than face-to-face 90 percent of the time.) Add time zone differences, unknown social cues, cultural differences and stereotypes, and you have the recipe for a project that feels more like a rollercoaster than a planned process.

Studies show that multicultural project teams have a higher potential for success than single-culture teams do, but they also have a higher potential for failure. Even highly data-driven projects need to be carefully managed across cultures because in any project, it’s the people, not the technologies, that spell (or dispel) success. Project management across cultures takes more and different management, not less of it.

What makes the difference between an effective global project team and one that squeaks by inefficiently?

You guessed it. The touchy-feely stuff.

Here’s the good news for all the engineers and tech gurus who are groaning: Building cross-cultural relationships has become an accessible skill with practical elements and benefits. What’s more, when the skill is not applied, real time and

money are lost. Today’s project managers must learn how various cultures view teamwork, time, deadlines, and hierarchical work relationships. These are the new global survival skills, and people who ignore them will find themselves under more stress and with fewer positive results. Whether or not we agree with globalization, it is a fact of life in today’s workplace.

Throughout my experience working with clients such as Prudential Financial, The Home Depot, Intercontinental Hotels Group, Cummins, and Emerson Process, among others, four excellent practices have emerged from common project management challenges and successes. The most relevant of these I’ll share with you with the hope of minimizing your headaches and increasing your accomplishments.

1. Balance task and relationship

When Intel Corp., maker of computer processors, chipsets, and more, brought international employees to the United States for a one-year project, managers decided from the start that they didn’t want the diverse set of international people to operate only according to U.S. rules and ways of doing business. Managers saw the diversity as a distinct advantage and instituted a series of preparations that made the project a huge success. They had ongoing relationship-building activities; shared food from various cultures; celebrated Chinese New Year, Ramadan, and the Fourth of July; sought schools that taught English as a second language for the family members; and established a “people team” to educate and build connections. This project was one of the most successful ones Intel had employed in terms of results. One engineering group leader from Malaysia said that all the Intel preparation and relationship building made him feel not only valuable but also motivated and more productive.

Relationship building is no longer a nice-to-have benefit in global project management; instead, it has become the oil that keeps the engine purring. To understand the cultural value difference, ask yourself this question: When you start a project, do you prefer to assign the action items first and then select

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the people or do you prefer to select the people who best work with you and then assign tasks to those people? How you answer the question may be partly cultural.

Think of task and relationship as two ends of a spectrum. People on the task side typically like to get down to business on a project right away. Getting the task completed is their main priority, then comes building relationships by, for example, celebrating with the team. For people at the other end of the spectrum, the task is facilitated by the relationship, and they highly value the act of taking the time to get to know people at the beginning of a project. The line between work and personal life tends to be more blurred, and business lunches are more about socializing than pure business.

Establishing where your project team falls on this spectrum poses challenges but holds importance in successful project planning. For example, India and China, two of the world's rising economic powers, have typically been placed at the relationship end of the spectrum, whereas the United States falls more on the task side. As globalization merges business practices around the world, it appears that the younger generations of engineers, IT workers, and business people are adopting a more global standard.

Don't be fooled. Cultures with thousands of years of history don't change in one generation, and neither should they. Western countries have begun to recognize balancing task with relationships as a critical facet of staying competitive in the global market. The same is true of project management. My experience and studies have shown over and over that a focus on the human element makes for a more successful project, especially when that project is long term.

How do you balance task and relationship?

- Have patience. Building relationships takes a long time. Building relationships electronically takes longer. Think and behave like you will be in the relationship for a long time.
- Get to know each other on a personal level. Post pictures, bios, and fun facts about team members in each location, including pictures of your families, children, and hobbies. Create a personal home page for each team member. Share professional achievements with each other.
- When appropriate, ask colleagues about holidays, food, festivals, regional differences, and favorite movies. Most people have pride in their nation, city, and family, and they like to highlight the positives.
- Learn the correct spelling and pronunciation of each team member's name. Do not be afraid to ask.
- Call your colleagues when you need to. Issues are often resolved by phone more quickly than by e-mail. Also call colleagues occasionally when you don't need to. Keep in touch regularly.
- Start conference calls with a welcome and an initial round

of introductions (including name and place: "This is Bill in Fairfax."). Ask one warm-up question about the weather, a sports event, or an event at the company.

- When colleagues from other sites come to visit, take them to dinner and make sure they feel welcome. Do things together as a team to build goodwill. For example, go to a baseball game or other leisure-time activity.
- Be aware of differences but focus on commonalities.
- Hold regular face-to-face meetings; there is no substitute for them. They are the glue that holds remote sites together.
- Assign a cultural bridge builder for your team, someone who helps with difficulties and who feels comfortable with both (or multiple) cultures.
- Celebrate achievements, milestones, successes, project conclusions, and breakthrough ideas.
- Co-create your own team culture that transcends national culture. Remind each other constantly about your common goal.

For those of you who may be thinking that you don't have time for such relationship building, consider this: In cross-cultural project management, you can either invest time on the front end or the back. If you do neither, your failure rate will be high.

When you spend a little time up front getting to know people in the early stages of the project, you ensure greater efficiency for the remaining stages. People are more likely to help out during tight deadlines or times of crisis. In the case of my engineer client who didn't want the touchy-feely stuff, when I asked him at the end of class what he learned most, he replied, "I learned that you can't just chuck work over the virtual fence to India and expect it to be done perfectly. You need to follow up, talk to the people more regularly, and even call when you don't need to."

2. Use project phasing and build on strengths

In any project, cross-cultural or otherwise, significant differences in personality and work approaches will be present among team members. Successful project managers use these differences to their advantage, leveraging each person's strength for the elevation of the project as a whole. For example, if you have one team member from a culture that highly values relationships, use that person to network, solve people problems, and build connections with new suppliers. If someone highly values structure and hierarchy, assign that person to aspects of the project that require quick delegation, thorough work, and sequential timing.

The idea of using cultural and individual differences to develop strengths applies to members of your own culture as well, but it becomes more important in cross-cultural projects because people not belonging to the majority or headquarters' culture may feel excluded.

Cultural differences can be leveraged to positive ends, and good timing helps. Being part of a diverse team can pose challenges, but be mindful of the easiest time for people of varied backgrounds, opinions, and cultures to work together. When peers brainstorm and innovate, a distinct openness takes shape. In fact, one of the biggest advantages of a diverse team is more and better ideas. When do the biggest challenges arise? When these varied minds have to converge on a decision or method. In successful cross-cultural project management, diverse members begin by innovating together, brainstorming ideas for the project, and letting each member's voice, experience, technical expertise, and ideas be heard. The session does not have to be formal, but someone should take minutes and distribute notes to the whole group. Such a meeting is a great way to kick off a project, and it allows creativity to emerge.

3. Set project norms

Assumptions are a dangerous aspect of cross-cultural project planning. All human beings make assumptions, but you can save your project from irritating inefficiency by conducting a short norm-setting meeting before each project. Without a norm-setting discussion, common assumptions are left to cultural or individual interpretation. For example, what "ASAP" means to people raised in Atlanta might not be the same for those from Shanghai, China. An Atlantan may think it means something must be handled before anything else is done; an Asian may think it means something must be handled after all the other important things are done.

When you indignantly claim that your Indian colleague doesn't respond to your e-mails in a timely manner, what does it mean? Does your colleague know the specifics of your expectations or do you assume that he or she should know? Before each project begins, set project norms with all team members, including those across time zones. The norm-setting meeting is ideally conducted face to face, but a conference call or video conferences will do. Answer the following questions at your meeting:

- How quickly do we respond to e-mail? (Norm = I respond to e-mail within 24 hours.)
- How will we resolve conflicts? (Norm = I bring up issues by phone or in person, not by e-mail. Issues are brought up within 24 hours. Anonymous suggestion boxes may also be used.)
- How will we celebrate milestones?
- How will we share the burden of time zone differences?
- Which goals can we all accept and commit to?
- How will we handle unmet deadlines?
- How will we define what is urgent?

Setting project norms serves two purposes. Norms create a proactive process that starts the project off with everyone on the same page. A discussion of norms roots out cultural assumptions that team members may not have known existed. In addition, everyone involved gets to determine the norms rather than the project defaulting to the norms of the manager or a dominant personality or culture. After a norm-setting session, the project has more buy-in from everyone.



4. Manage time across cultures

In my career teaching cross-cultural business skills, I have seen clients get upset about the issue of time more than any other topic. The concern about time makes sense because how we orient ourselves in time is how we define meaning in our lives. Sound dramatic? I have seen perfectly rational, high-ranking business people nearly scream in class when I suggest that the phrase "on time" has multiple meanings across cultures.

"But late is late!" I've heard people yell, sweat beading on their brows, faces turning red. "If a meeting starts at 8 a.m., you better be there no later than five minutes after eight; otherwise, it's rude."

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In managing projects across cultures, time and how it is viewed is crucial to project success. In the United States, business tends to operate in what is called the fixed-time system, which means time is linear; one thing happens at a time, and therefore fixed schedules are highly prioritized. A meeting scheduled at 10 a.m. likely starts no later than 10:05. A project with a deadline of June 30 would, barring unforeseen circumstances, be completed by June 30. Time is considered a commodity and it is highly valued.

By contrast, the fluid-time system is used in many parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In this system, time is more circular and flexible. Several things can be going on at the same time; therefore, schedules and deadlines become things to aim for. In this system, relationships are highly valued.

Neither the fixed-time nor fluid-time system is better or worse, but cultural gaps between the two wreak havoc on a project. My experience has shown that the way time is perceived is the most difficult cultural adaptation for people to make. With much of global business shifting toward the Western fixed-time system, people from countries such as India and Mexico struggle to make the change even if they have lived in the United States for several years. Why? Imagine that you were born and raised in the United States and someone told you to start showing up two hours late to meetings, work, parties, everything. Would you be able to do it? Not likely.

That shift is the equivalent of telling a fluid-time person to be “on time” for everything. For people from that side of the spectrum, fixed time makes little sense. If you have a meeting at 10 a.m. but you run into a colleague who you haven’t seen in a year, you will prioritize stopping to talk to that person, and you may arrive 20 minutes after the meeting starts, which won’t seem late to you at all. In another instance, you may arrive early to a conference.

Project managers and team members may wonder how this cultural difference can be handled in a business context. After all, in project planning, deliverables are the best measure of success.

The best approach is to escape the either-or dilemma of either I’m culturally sensitive and let people be late or I crack down on their time and ignore their culture.

The most successful strategy I have given my clients is to get creative with time management while at the same time encouraging team members to adapt to the fixed-time system when necessary. Ignoring the benefits of the fluid-time system is unwise. When you need people to stay late or shift their time around for a project, fluid timers are often quite willing to accommodate. Here are some best practices for managing fluid-time people on a fixed-time project:

- Create meeting agendas with reverse prioritization. Address the



most important items at the end of the meeting. Alternately, explain to fluid-time staff members that they can show up when they want to, but you will start on time. In that case, put the most important things first on the agenda. This method may help people adjust culturally to fixed time, if needed.

- Plan buffer time in your calendar. Don’t plan meetings too close together when you know fluid-time people are involved.
- Allow time to build relationships. Often fluid-time cultures allow flexibility to make time for relationships and people. Solid relationships can make a positive contribution to your project.
- Although a risky option, set false times for meetings. Tell people a meeting starts at 8:30 a.m. when it really starts at 9 a.m. The same can be done with deadlines.
- When meeting a fluid-time person, bring work, laptop, books or other technology with you so you don’t feel like you are wasting your time waiting with nothing to do.
- Explain reasons for deadlines and other important time schedules.

Monitor fluid-time people in a casual, friendly way several times along the path to a deadline. Don’t contact that person the day before a project is due and ask about the status.

Cultural differences in project management can be difficult to navigate, but whether or not you agree with the benefits of globalization, its effects will be felt for a long time to come, especially in the engineering industry. Taking the time to understand how culture affects a project and an organization not only makes smart business sense but also makes our everyday work life smoother and easier — the improved flow is priceless.

You never know what rewards can be found by building relationships, getting to know people, and learning about their backgrounds. You might take your career and your company to a whole new level. ~

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