

Leadership and Organizational Vision In Managing a Multiethnic and Multicultural Project Team

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**DIVERSITY ON A PROJECT TEAM
CAN BE AN ASSET. HERE ARE SOME WAYS
TO TAP THE LATENT CREATIVITY OF
HETEROGENEOUS GROUPS.**

Project teams made up of members with differing cultural, ethnic, and corporate backgrounds and of different genders can be significantly superior to homogeneous teams if properly managed. They can also be much worse than even a poorly managed homogeneous team if leaders ignore the differences between people of different backgrounds.

Certain characteristics of leadership can enhance the chances for success in working with diverse project teams. An open style of management increases trust. A good sense of humor can diffuse potential misunderstandings. A sincere interest by the project manager in his staff as individuals goes a long way toward creating good morale. A good communication style is also important. Many teams are composed of members whose first language is not that of the dominant group.

An understanding of the differences in world view between groups is essential to promoting understanding between team members. The same event can be interpreted differently by people depending on their origin and what they have been conditioned to believe. Understanding and avoiding stereotypes can prevent self-fulfilling prophecies.

THE PROJECT EXAMPLE

The project team used as an example from time to time in this paper was assembled to manage the design and construction of a \$200-million infrastructure rehabilitation program in Miami. The project is known as the Pump Station Improvement Program. The team had nearly 50 technical, administrative, and managerial members from five separate consulting organizations. Many minority ethnic groups were represented on the team: Hispanic/Latino, Arab, Indian, African-American, and Asian. Numerous nationalities were also represented: American, Indian, Jamaican, Dominican, Venezuelan, Cuban, Palestinian, and Lebanese. Several religions were also involved: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

The corporate cultures of the management team firms were also decidedly varied. The largest firm had 3,500 employees and elaborate policies and procedures. The smallest firm had fewer than 10 employees and a much less formal structure. Three of the firms were owned by members of minorities.

The management team supervised the design efforts of several major consulting engineering firms and the construction activities of several

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large and numerous small contractors. The project involved the rehabilitation of more than 400 sewage pumping stations and the construction of about 70 mi of new force mains.

The program manager was an Anglo-American man. The deputy program managers comprised an Anglo-American man, an African-American man, an Arab-American man, and an Anglo-American woman. The resident client representative was a Cuban-American man.

PROJECTS VERSUS PERMANENT ORGANIZATIONS

Projects are very different from permanent organizations.

Permanent organizations exist to provide a continuing service or to make a product. The organization can develop procedures over time to help it achieve maximum efficiency and ensure its continued existence. Since permanent organizations rarely have sufficient staff to handle a major project when it comes along, a project team is usually formed.

A project has a stated goal. It is not part of the normal operations of the parent organization. The project has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The project team exists to complete its task and then to dissolve itself. The leadership of a project team must constantly balance this temporary aspect with the human need to belong, to be gratified, and to have security.

Project teams comprising members of different gender and with different cultural, ethnic, and corporate backgrounds are becoming more common. Economics is becoming increasingly global. A project in Saudi Arabia may be designed by a French firm, managed by a German firm, and constructed by a Korean firm using Pakistani labor and Turkish craftsmen. The steel may be from Italy, and the concrete foundations may use portland cement from Egypt. An American public works project in a major city may require a management team that reflects the ethnic and cultural makeup of the community. That same project may also demand diversity in technological and administrative skills.

The types of people who succeed in permanent organizations are not always the types who make it on project teams. Many bureaucrats, for example, do not like being on project teams because project organization and procedures are subject to constant change to reflect changes in the nature of the work. A perfectionist can also often be extremely uncomfortable on a project team. Schedule- and cost-driven demands do not always allow the luxury of a studied, measured, perfect solution to the problem at hand.

The inherently diverse nature of project work, coupled with the increasingly diverse nature of project teams, makes for an interesting leadership opportunity for project managers.

GROUP IDENTITIES

For the purposes of this paper, a group identity is a personal affiliation with people with whom one has certain things in common. These identities are important in understanding how cultural diversity can affect a project team. Even though every person is unique and should always be treated as an individual, it is important to remember that his self-concept has been formed to some degree by the group with which he is affiliated.

For some individuals, affiliation and identification with their groups are more important than for other individuals. To ignore group identities is to ignore a reality of how people interact with one another. Even if a person doesn't identify strongly with a group, he may still be treated as a member of the group by others. For example, a woman executive who does not particularly identify with her gender group may still be treated as a woman first and an executive second by some of her coworkers. A black Nigerian may identify more strongly with his religion than his race but still may be treated as a member of a black group by certain coworkers.

There are many types of groups, among them cultural, corporate, national, racial, religious, educational, professional, ethnic, and political. Some group identifications are easy to make visually. Skin color and gender, for example, are evident to anyone with good vision. This is also the reason why racial and gender prejudice are the most common varieties. Cultural differences are less obvious. If a person identifies strongly with his culture, it means that the person shares certain beliefs with other members of the culture. That person can identify with several groups, of course. A man may be American, white, a Florida Gator, a Catholic, and a Midwesterner. A woman may be black, a lawyer, a Protestant, a southerner, and American. In other words, the person may belong to more than one group.

A Jamaican may be black, a Protestant, and an engineer. But the group he identifies most with may be his national identity, Jamaican. An American also may be black, a Protestant, and an engineer, but he may identify most strongly with his ethnicity. The relative importance to the individual of these group identities has a lot to do with his self-concept. The history of blacks in America is decidedly different from that of blacks in Jamaica. This group history plays some part in the way the black American and the black Jamaican view their worlds and the way in which they react to project challenges and relationships with other people.

ADVANTAGES OF DIVERSITY

Diverse project teams can be more innovative and creative than teams in which everyone is alike. Multiple points of view can be brought to bear on any project

problem. Creativity feeds on diversity since a project team must draw on every aspect of its being to succeed, not just certain elements (R. M. Kanter, *The Change Masters* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983]).

A group that is homogeneous, on the other hand, tends to have the same world view. Members of the group have been raised in a culture that believes certain things, expects certain types of behavior, and has created reward and punishment systems to reinforce these notions. Even though not all members of a group will react predictably or uniformly, certain normal attitudes can be expected. In some cultures, for example, Japan, modesty and quiet demeanor are valued. A member of this culture might believe that "a nail that sticks up out of a board will be quickly hammered down" (John P. Fernandez, *The Diversity Advantage. How American Business Can Outperform Japanese and European Companies in the Global Marketplace* [New York: Lexington Books, 1993]). This belief can lead to hesitancy. One of the dangers of a homogeneous group then becomes "group think." Everyone assumes that since everyone else believes the same thing it must be a good idea.

A heterogeneous group, one with members of different cultures, is more likely to come up with alternative solutions to a problem (C.J. Nemeth, "Differential Contributions of Majority and Minority Influence," *Psychological Review*, volume 93, pages 23–32, 1986). Minority viewpoints are not always obvious to members of the majority group. If the group environment values diversity and the differences in people, these solutions can be a more regular part of the project environment than in an equivalent homogeneous team. Different world views often lead to different solutions to identical problems.

Diverse groups also have a broader and more varied base of experience on which to draw in solving project problems. More alternatives are generated to the solution of a problem. The diverse group is also more flexible in adapting to change. Managing diversity also enhances organizational flexibility (L.R. Hoffman [with N.R.F. Maier], "Quality and Acceptance of Problem Solutions by Members of Homogeneous and Heterogeneous Groups," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, volume 62, number 2, pages 401–407, 1961). This is extremely important in project work because of the constantly changing nature of the work. There is even some evidence that members of minority groups are more flexible thinkers. For example, research has shown that women have a higher tolerance for ambiguity than men (N.G. Rotter [with A.N. O'Connell], "The Relationships among Sex-Role Orientation, Cognitive Complexity, and Tolerance for Ambiguity," *Sex Roles*, volume 8, pages 1209–1220, 1982). This can be linked to the ability to perform ambiguous tasks. Other re-

search shows that bilingual people have higher levels of divergent thinking and cognitive flexibility than those who are monolingual (W. Lambert, "The Effects of Bilingualism on the Individual: Cognitive and Socio-cultural Consequences," in *Bilingualism: Psychological, Social, and Educational Implications* [San Diego: Academic Press, 1977]). Since the incidence of bilingualism is much greater among members of minority cultural groups, it appears that cognitive flexibility on a project team is increased by including these minority groups.

DISADVANTAGES OF DIVERSITY

A diverse group by definition is not homogeneous. A homogeneous group tends to speak the same language. They use the same words, expressions, meanings and rely on the same verbal and nonverbal cues to meaning. It is much easier for members of these groups to communicate with and understand one another. They have been doing it all of their lives.

A diverse group, on the other hand, may include members who speak English as their first language but with a rural twist from the American South or a twang from the upper Midwest. English speakers from the islands of Jamaica, Dominica, and Barbados have their own dialect. The same words may mean different things. The problem is further compounded for group members for whom English is a second or third language. They may know the basics but lack the knowledge of the common idioms used by the dominant group. American English is loaded with idiomatic expressions that are impenetrable to a person who is not a native speaker. Americans use these idioms constantly as a type of communications shorthand.

In addition to the basic communication problems of a diverse group, group cohesiveness can be a problem. People generally like to associate with people like themselves. Most people feel more comfortable with people who have the same beliefs, values, language, and appearance. It is more difficult to create cohesiveness among members of heterogeneous teams. Stereotypes may also be used to understand or interact with a person rather than that person's actual character.

Some of the advantages of diverse groups can, if improperly managed, become serious disadvantages. For example, the larger numbers of alternative solutions to problems can be detrimental if no consensus can be reached on which is the optimal (C.R. Shephard, *Small Groups* [San Francisco: Chandler Publishing, 1964]). Also, if the goal of the project is not clearly understood by all members, the commonality of purpose will be absent and decision making will become agonizingly slow and inefficient.

EXAMPLES OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Not all cultures have the same concepts of space and time. The personal space a person feels comfortable with, for example, varies from culture to culture. A Hispanic, Latin American, or Italian-American man may stand very close to another member of his group while talking. But if he stands just as close to an Anglo-American, the latter might well move back, feeling his personal space has been violated.

Some cultures focus more on the future than on the past or present. For them, it is important to have a schedule, to know what they will be doing in the future and where they will be when doing it. This is typical, for example, of many European cultures. It is typical of the dominant Anglo culture in America. Anglo-American culture also typically believes in 50- and 60-hour workweeks, meetings before or after normal working hours, and a strict separation of work life and family life. Some cultures find this Anglo attitude repressive and unreasonable and cooperate with it only because it is required to get along with the dominant Anglo group. Other cultures are far more interested in the past and the present. For them, the future is unreal and difficult to comprehend.

Some cultures touch a lot. Men touch women. Men kiss and hug other men. These cultures feel touching is a normal way of life and would feel incomplete without this way of communicating. Other cultures, however, find this kind of behavior repulsive. Some cultures use many hand gestures when communicating and speak animatedly. Other cultures are far more restrained and feel uncomfortable in the presence of demonstrative people.

Anglo-American culture admires a steady gaze. It is important to look directly into another's eyes and maintain eye contact for long periods of time. Many Asians, on the other hand, are not only uncomfortable with this but also consider it rude. They prefer brief eye contact and looking away for extended periods.

An understanding of these cultural differences can prevent misunderstandings. If an Anglo-American man recoils from the touch of a French man, it would be useful for the latter to know that the response should not be taken personally and that it is merely a manifestation of an Anglo cultural preference. If an Asian man avoids direct eye contact with an Anglo man, it does not mean he is shifty, has something to hide, or is intimidated.

USE OF STEREOTYPES

When people don't know much about a culture, they often fall back on stereotypes to help them understand an individual from that culture. They first determine the group to which they think the individual belongs, then call on their memories of the group stereotype and ascribe traits dictated by that stereotype to the individual in question. This does not always work too well.

Stereotypes are resorted to mainly because they're thought to be useful. They seem to simplify the task of understanding someone or something. On the other hand, there are two big problems about relying on stereotypes as a tool to boost mental efficiency. First, your assumptions about the characteristics of the group in question had better be correct. Second, even if your assumptions about the group are reasonably correct, you can't be sure that the individual will be characteristic of the group.

There is a huge difference between acknowledging group differences and falling back on stereotypes. Valuing diversity means basing your beliefs about the characteristics of a culture on valid data. This basis is not much different from an engineer's act of gathering data and making solid assumptions to help solve a technical problem. Valuing diversity also means recognizing that there are always differences within any group. Stereotypes, on the other hand, not only embody traits and characteristics that are seen as making a group different but also pass judgment on these differences. This is why many stereotypes involve words or phrases with negative or positive connotations. It is wise to avoid stereotyping.

MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

The technical aspects of any project require a high degree of skill in applied science. Many of the participants in a program or project will have technical degrees. This is a common bond. Engineers are trained to evaluate and solve problems in similar ways in all cultures. This common bond should be emphasized and used. An Indian engineer can understand and communicate technical principles to a Hispanic engineer. An African-American engineer can relate to an Anglo-American engineer. This common educational background and way of solving problems can create a natural bond between people who are otherwise very different.

Engineering, while not exactly a precise science, nevertheless consists in the application of scientific knowledge to the solution of problems involving nature and human beings. Managing project resources, however, is still more art than science since it involves the vagaries and vicissitudes of human behavior and the unpredictability of external influences. It is useful for a project leader to have a basic grounding in the fundamental ways that he can affect motivation, for example, through fairness, consideration, humor, salary increases, personal contact, promotions, and building team spirit.

A project manager should have a good understanding of the project and its goals and be able to communicate this understanding clearly. He should be both a long-range planner and a tactician. He should understand the capabilities and limitations of each member of the project team. And he should be interested in these members not

only as project employees but as people with individual histories of triumph and tragedy in their careers and personal lives. The only way to develop this understanding is to spend time with staff members.

The differences between individuals and cultures are many and complex. No project manager can know everything there is to know, but he should make an effort. He needs to review the career résumés of everyone on the staff not only to become familiar with experience and technical qualifications but also to look for clues to group identification and cultural affiliation. Each person on a project team has loyalties to his group, his school, his country, and his personal interests. It is advisable and often imperative to know as much about these aspects of your staff as possible.

Informal sessions with small groups should be scheduled to discuss the differences in cultural expectations. Ignoring the differences in people gets in the way of understanding. Valuing the differences and learning as much as you can will go a long way toward building a spirit of cooperation and enthusiasm. All team members should be informed of the attitudinal differences of other team members (H.C. Triandis [with E.R. Hall and R.B. Ewen], "Member heterogeneity and dyadic creativity," *Human Relations*, volume 18, pages 33–55, 1965). They should also be cautioned about the danger of using stereotypes.

The manager should look for things that individuals from different cultures have in common. Families, friends, education, and pride are all things that should be emphasized and related to everyone. These common elements can help understanding.

In a team embodying different corporate cultures and individuals from different organizations, the approach should not involve any type of favoritism. The manager should use techniques to build team spirit, and a team organizational structure should be recognized and followed instead of a corporate structure. Promotion or retention of good performers following project completion also helps in motivating team members in a project environment.

Short sessions in communication techniques can also be useful to promoting understanding on the project. If American English is the language of the dominant project management group, then the use of American idioms should be closely monitored. If you use an idiom in communicating with a person for whom American English is not his first language, look for signs of understanding. Just because he smiles does not mean he understands. Ask him if he knows what the idiom means, and explain it if he doesn't. Experience has shown that not everyone on a diverse project team will understand American expressions of the following type:

Don't let the cat out of the bag.

Don't buy a pig in a poke.
The squeaky wheel gets the oil.
Don't step on your foot.
He is a loose cannon.
Whomp there it is !!
Yo! What it is?
He shoots from the hip.
Let's circle the wagons.
He has a screw loose.
He hits below the belt.
He has a big head.
Hang loose.
Let's play it by ear.

The very act of attempting to manage cultural diversity enhances project team performance and flexibility. For example, as policies and procedures governing how the project is managed are broadened, and operating methods are made less rigid and standardized, the system should become more accommodating of uncertainty and more flexible. Also, the tolerance of different points of view should lead to more openness to new ideas in general.

CONCLUSION

Although it is impossible for any manager to know everything about all cultures and ethnic groups, it is important to learn as much as possible. The very act of expressing genuine interest in an individual and his background improves morale and understanding. This improvement translates into more effective project performance.

Among the management techniques that can boost team performance and help in handling multiethnic, multicultural teams are the following:

- Utilizing the common bond of technical knowledge;
- Applying fundamental human motivators;
- Understanding team members' personalities;
- Understanding group identifications and affiliations;
- Valuing the differences between people;
- Understanding common elements;
- Promoting communication;
- Creating a flexible and accommodating system;
- Bringing to bear the power of humor;
- Eschewing stereotypes.

Program and construction management projects attract hardheaded, pragmatic people with a technical bent. But well-rounded technical people with a solid foundation in liberal arts can play an important role in facilitating the work of the project team. The payoff is a well-managed diverse project team that can perform significantly better than its homogeneous counterparts.

Communication and understanding are of fundamental importance in effectively managing a diverse team.