

**Managing Cultural Boundaries in Projects:
How the Project Manager and Project Office Can Facilitate
Cross-Border Interaction and Learning**

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MANAGING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES IN PROJECTS: HOW THE PM AND PROJECT OFFICE CAN FACILITATE CROSS-BORDER INTERACTION AND LEARNING

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to international research, monocultural organisations are successful in achieving *average* effectiveness. Multicultural organisations achieve either effectiveness which is very below average (when cultures misunderstand or spend energy competing with each other) or – at the other end of the spectrum - exceptional effectiveness, when cultures can recognize and build positively on their differences and similarities. Getting to the stage of exceptional effectiveness is more easily said than done.

When a company has many projects running or when projects are taking place in varied settings, learning from project to project is crucial, if the company wants to be among the best. Yet the learning environment in international projects is complicated by the fact of the existence of multiple stakeholders, each with its own cultural norms, values and preferences. There are multiple organisational cultures involved, multiple project-line organisation interfaces involved, differing expectations to "normal" project management, as well as conflicting interests, which are exacerbated by cultural roots and therefore expectations.

A typical project manager reaction to such diversity is to try to smooth over or to reject the differences in order to more quickly reach unity of purpose and direction. Another typical reaction is to centralize and orchestrate, implying control. Neither of these reactions, though humanly understandable, are particularly constructive. Indeed projects and organisations transform when they can differentiate without excluding and integrate without forcing unity.

The "learning organisation" is the mantra of our decade. No one denies that being able to learn from one's projects (as project manager – PM, as project participant, as host organisation) is admirable, if not crucial in today's world. Thus one of the roles of the PM and the Project Office is to create a learning environment allowing project-to-project learning. The learning in cross-cultural/cross-border projects needs to focus on effective approaches to integration and differentiation.

Based on 15 years' experience in training and coaching international project managers and facilitating cross-border organisational change in multinational companies, this paper focuses on:

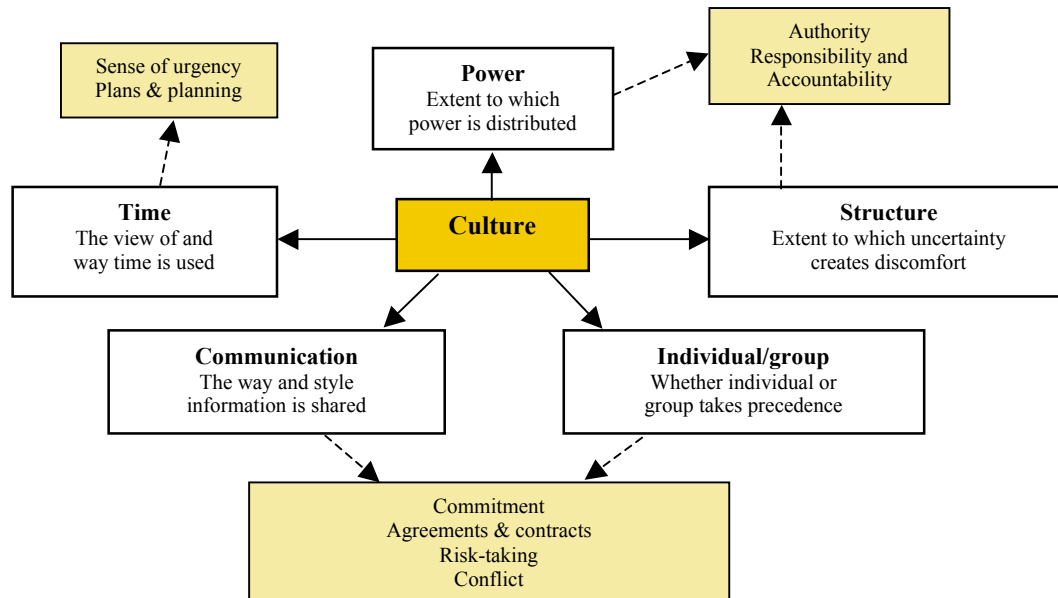
- (1) Why learning in the multicultural project environment is crucial but particularly difficult,
- (1) What characterizes cultural interaction in cross-border projects,
- (1) What are the problems and anxieties which interfere in progress? When do the moments of cross-cultural "enlightenment" (the "aha!" experience) take place?
- (1) What skills can project managers cultivate for managing borders and boundaries, and for managing the conflicting needs in groups for differentiation and integration.

2. CULTURAL ASPECTS THAT ARE IMPORTANT IN PROJECTS

Much has been written about cultural differences. This paper will not try to repeat any of this literature. Suffice to say that – in terms of projects – the diagram below illustrates some of the key variables that culture influences, that have an impact on projects. These key variables are:

- Structure
- Power
- Communication
- Time
- Individual vs. group preference

The shaded boxes indicate areas which result from different perceptions of these basic variables. When people of different (national or organisational) cultures meet in projects, they will therefore have differing perceptions of authority, responsibility and accountability; sense of urgency and attitude to planning; commitment, conflict, risk-taking and agreements & contracts.



There is plenty to disagree about in projects.

3. LEARNING IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

As explained by Etienne Wenger in his book "Communities of Practice" [1], human beings have since the beginning of time formed communities that share cultural practices reflecting their collective learning: a tribe around a cave fire, a medieval guild, a street gang, a project team of engineers. Wenger calls these "communities of practice". Through the communities we belong to and the interaction between them we acquire new learnings.

The existence of communities implies of course the existence of boundaries, which define one group in relation to another. Inside a community, learning takes place because competence and experience converge to define the community. At boundaries, competence and experience diverge. Here they are exposed to foreign competencies and ways of thinking. When competencies and experiences are too close, little learning takes place, whereas differences, such as those encountered at boundaries, challenge and create a dynamic environment. Of course too much difference can be perceived as threatening and be too confronting, which then causes the person(s) at the boundary to turn inwards to a known path and "safety".

In the project world, boundaries may be between different organisational units engaged in an product development project; they may be between subsidiaries in different countries engaged in a joint project to develop a common cross-organisational IT system; boundaries may be experienced between a project manager located in one country but responsible for a project organisation in a supplier organisation in another country; boundaries may be experienced between project participants who come from different countries but who are working at one geographical site.

Borders can be both mental (e.g. perceived) and/or physical. They can be experienced internally *within* a group or organisation, as well as externally identifying others as the *outside*.

From my work through the years with project managers of numerous international projects, I have seen some of the following reactions occur *at the boundary* when different cultures interact in projects:

- there is a tendency (sometimes) for participants to think in terms of we-they/us-them – ”they” are hard to understand.
- a perception that working with ”them” represents a difficult, energy-demanding task.
- restrictions are created which in fact don’t exist, but which are self-imposed.
- cliques (sometimes) form around cultural differences. Likes seek likes.
- rumours – perhaps unfounded – develop.
- some project participants feel they are being treated unfairly because of race/nationality/background.
- language differences create an advantage for some, a disadvantage for others.
- having to handle cultural differences costs time, money, pain.

According to Wenger, the potential for learning and innovation in a social learning system (like a project) lies in its ”configuration of strong core practices and active boundary processes.” [2] Strong core practices within a community are its source of identity. By boundary practices he means ways that communities interact by connecting practices in significant ways. For example,

- Coordination: Can boundary processes and objects be interpreted in different practices in a way that enables coordinated action? (for example, documents, models, blueprints, procedures)
- Transparency: Do boundary processes give access to the meaning they have in various practices?
- Negotiability: Do boundary processes provide a one-way or a two-way connection?

It seems to me that Project Managers need to develop their skills at ”boundary watching” – managing the boundaries between project and line organisation, between project and sponsors, between different units engaged in a project, perhaps across national or cultural boundaries. The project manager is the boundary broker that ensures coordination, transparency and negotiability – that creates connections, moves knowledge, shares information.

Exchanging experience and sharing knowledge is another way of learning in the multicultural environment. Yet in practice, exchanging experience between projects and between teams in projects is difficult – especially across cultural boundaries. One pharmaceutical company organises its R&D projects with parallel core teams at the headquarters and at foreign companies. These core teams, which in structure function like each other, work together 2 and 2 across the globe. Even though the structure is similar, and sharing experience and learnings is desirable, still it is difficult. Why?

Two reasons have been cited:

- 1) the preconditions are different in different projects (100-800-3000 employees)
- 1) the ways the projects are anchored in the organisations varies. There are different individual, group- and organisational barriers to anchoring the projects, influencing how knowledge can be moved across boundaries.

Maybe other inhibitors exist which retard, erode or prevent knowledge transfer, such as those listed by Davenport and Prusak (1998) [3]:

- lack of trust
- different cultures, vocabularies, frames of reference
- lack of time and meeting places
- status and rewards go to knowledge owners
- lack of absorptive capacity in recipients
- belief that knowledge is the prerogative of particular groups, not-invented-here syndrome
- intolerance for mistakes or need for help.

In order to facilitate cross-cultural learning, the problems and anxieties need to be identified and overcome.

What are the problems making learning at cross-cultural boundaries difficult?

1. Firstly, the cultural ”baggage” that each of us bears with us from childhood and refined by schooling and work experience lies at a subconscious level. While we can see the cultural preferences of the ”other”, it is supremely difficult to identify one’s own cultural roots, particularly at the moment of experience. Being embedded at a subconscious level, these are hard to explain to others.
2. Secondly, it is the very basic things that are at stake, that get under the skin, that irritate. It is the basics that unconsciously irritate, because we subconsciously assume that communication functions. And when it

- doesn't, we fluster, seeking ways to improve the situation, yet not really knowing what is wrong. (This are the moments when a trained outside facilitator can help the engaged parties identify what it is that irritates.)
3. Thirdly, we are often blind to the effect of our own behavior - with repercussions!

What are the anxieties?

The following is a list of anxieties which inhibit learning in multicultural situations:

1. The rather common attitude that "We ought to be able to manage culture issues! The difficult ones are the technical ones!" (actual quote of senior project manager). Therefore attention is paid to the technical issues, even though the cultural issues may be more fundamental.
1. Fear of letting go versus the felt need for control. The need for control creates a sense of security. Having to trust the process and "let go" creates anxiety.
1. Fear of revealing oneself, and therefore an unwillingness to bring cultural issues to the surface. The issues are personal and sensitive.
1. The tendency to regard ourselves as different (in a sense, better?) than the others: We-They
1. A sense of insecurity associated with the feeling that maybe we are the only ones experiencing problems, and therefore maybe the others are better than we are. In fact, the others *do* see problems – but *other* ones!

4. LEARNING: THE "AHA" EXPERIENCES FOR BOTH THE ORGANISATION AND INDIVIDUALS

I have asked project members and project leaders when their moments of learning have taken place. Perhaps by identifying and describing these moments, more such moments can be created for others.

In several companies, the moment of learning came when they recognized that cultural dimensions were at the root of their troubles. "We've tried everything else, it must be culture!" And so it was – the tension arising at the boundary between cultural different units and individuals, each unconsciously expecting "their" way to be the best way.

Other moments of learning for individuals, as they have expressed them:

- Learning how to maneuver on the border. For example, pushing all personal anxieties and self-imposed restrictions aside, and taking the courage to ask for explanations, reasoning, appropriate examples.
- Being allowed to try out alternative leadership styles, but only in an environment of safety and non-judgement with feedback allowed.
- Asking and giving feedback based on cultural perceptions. Make it a norm to explain how one is accustomed to doing things. Explain what makes one comfortable in doing things.
- About language: recognizing that even language structure and vocabularies – the most basic channel for communicating – is in itself influenced by cultural values (for ex. "I" is the most commonly used word in English, or the lack of time indicators in Asian languages).
- Experiencing how handling language differences in creative ways can open up for learning, for example by stopping a project meeting being run in rapid English and switching the power balance by changing the language of discussion.
- Language can be an opportunity by being a reason for creating moments for personal reflection; multiple languages open up for alternative ways of formulating and perceiving things.
- Seeing the whole project from above – with cultural eyes – how do the stakeholders *really* interact with each other?
- When the patterns become visible
- Identifying the opportunities – and bringing the identified risks and opportunities down to a tangible, operational level.
- Role plays (guided) – where participants can experience "the feel" of another behavior, or perhaps a personal confrontation with "the other", or other opportunities for trying out alternative behaviors.
- Utilising diverse visualization techniques: we learn in different ways, some visually, some orally, and particularly when there are multiple languages being used, visualization techniques are effectful.
- Realizing about group work that *everyone* has to add value.

Two preconditions for learning that were mentioned often were the necessity of creating a safety zone which allows space and time for being oneself without being laughed at or other repercussions, and a safety zone which

allows one to use one's own language, which legitimizes the translator role, which allows time for thinking or taking a break.

5. THE CONFLICTING NEEDS FOR DIFFERENTIATION AND INTEGRATION IN GROUPS

Another way of looking at what happens in multicultural groups, both in terms of process as well as learning, is to seek inspiration from the work of Paul Lawrence and Jay Lorsch, who in classic work in the 1960's [⁴], investigated what makes certain companies in different sectors particularly effective. Those companies that were effective could differentiate appropriately *and* integrate functions. This work is part of the basis of the exceptional work of Sandra Janoff and Marvin Weisbord concerning facilitating change in large groups.[⁵], which I think can be a major source of inspiration for project managers.

Systems survive, develop and transform by accepting, owning and integrating differences. A system stunts its own growth by rejecting those who are different. And yet this is what so often happens in groups – the child who is different is mobbed in school, the employee most unlike the others is frozen out of his/her work group, a community or nation sets up barriers against immigrants and refugees. On the other hand, systems transform when a person-group-organisation-society validates differences without having to *do* something about them (e.g. reduce *or* exaggerate)⁶.

What is meant by differentiate and integrate?

Differentiate:

- To distinguish, classify, define, separate, group like with like.
- To isolate, exclude, ostracize, segregate, reject what is different.

Integrate:

- To make one, harmonize, blend, which implies unity
- To centralize, orchestrate, which implies control

Thus both concepts have positive as well as negative dimensions. The key is for a system – in this case a project – to be able to grow and to learn by being able to differentiate without excluding, integrating without forcing unity.

Lawrence and Lorsch found that common organisational errors were these:

1. Reducing differentiation to avoid conflict, e.g. pretending that differences that make a difference don't matter.
2. Over-differentiating, e.g. setting boundaries not needed for the task.
3. Avoiding or smoothing differences that would be handled better by confrontation or problem-solving.

I think project managers can make their cross-cultural projects much stronger and more successful if they could cultivate the abilities to differentiate and integrate in their projects – to do it continuously, and to help others do the same.

6. CONSEQUENCES: SKILLS FOR PROJECT MANAGER

What do these observations about boundary processes, differentiation and integration mean in reality for the project manager of a cross-cultural or cross-border project? What special skills and competencies are necessary?

The first is the realization that the project manager, instead of only watching the gantt charts, critical paths, budgets and milestones, needs to accept his role – and a key one at that – of being a boundary watcher. The project manager has to be able to facilitate or enable development and wholeness in a fragmented world. This is done by encouraging a greater capacity for creativity, by allowing for increased differentiation, by promoting a greater capacity for self-management and by promoting the integration of differences. It means being able to “own” his own anxieties about needing to control in a situation of uncertainty, learning instead to trust the process – that if given enough space – will lead to integration. It means accepting that integration is *not* same as consensus, just as little as differentiation is the same as conflict.

Advice or tips for the project manager

1. Create time, space and a positive atmosphere for building relationships, mutual respect and trust.
2. Keep the common overall goal in sight.
3. Maintain boundaries – and use them constructively.
4. Make visible for everyone the involved parties' different (cultural) starting points and cultural strengths, and allow for their integration.
5. Create a common platform: vocabulary, "rules".
6. Utilize different work forms. Balance task, structure and process.
Be aware of different sources of motivation.
7. Use visualization techniques – we learn in different ways.
8. Surface informal sub-groups that form around key issues, independent of formal groups.
9. Keep information moving across the boundaries.
10. Be attentive to the dynamics of language dominance - recognize and deal with it positively.

7. WHAT THE PROJECT OFFICE CAN DO TO SUPPORT CROSS-BORDER LEARNING

The "learning organisation" is the mantra of our decade. Single-loop learning, double-loop learning, even triple-loop learning. No one denies that being able to learn from one's projects (as PM, as project participant, as host organisation) is admirable, probably crucial in today's world. Thus one of the roles of the PM and the Project Office is to create a learning environment that allows project-to-project learning.

The learning in cross-cultural/cross-border projects needs to focus on effective approaches to integration and differentiation, as well as boundary brokering. The Project Office can help by:

- institutionalizing methods, such as organisational landscaping (an analysis tool) and systematic ways of identifying cultural risks *and* opportunities
- developing and rewarding facilitator and border-brokering skills in project managers
- focussing on issues of language as a medium of cross-border understanding
- helping projects to periodically review their organisational processes, with a focus on differentiation and integration.

8. CONCLUSION

It has been said that "Knowledge management will become increasingly the management of the transfer of knowledge generated by cross-cultural teams."^[7] – such as in cross-border, international projects. Market pressures are making cross-cultural learning a necessity for competitive advantage, in fact survival. To cope with boundaries and borders (self-imposed and real), and differentiation and integration are skills which project managers need to cultivate and where the Project Office can play a supportive role. As one project manager expressed it, "The project manager's job it to look at process; he/she has the team to do the tasks!" The project manager has enough to do to watch the boundaries, keeping them open for transfer of knowledge, understanding/learning and competencies.

¹ Wenger, Etienne (1998), *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

² Wenger, Etienne, "Communities of practice and social learning systems", in Starkey, Ken, et.al., (2004) *How Organizations Learn: Managing the Search for Knowledge*, London: Thomson Learning, pp. 246-247.

³ Davenport, T.H. and Prusak, L. (1998) *Working Knowledge: How organisations manage what they know*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

⁴ Lawrence, Paul R. and Jay W. Lorsch (1996), *Organization and Environment: Managing Differentiation and Integration*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

⁵ Janoff, Sandra and Marvin Weisbord, compendium from training program "Facilitating the Whole System in the Room", Potsdam, 2003.

⁶ *ibid*, Janoff and Weisbord.

⁷ Holden, Nigel, (2002) *Cross-Cultural Management: A knowledge management perspective*, London: Prentice Hall.