
Cultural Awareness in Project Execution

After about thirty projects in almost as many different countries over the past nine years, I've noticed a common theme: cultural differences have a major impact on how different projects should be tackled. And cultural awareness has the potential to make projects run much more smoothly and leave clients more comfortable, more trusting and ready to return with more business.

This is especially the case if, say, you're flying in for a relatively short three-week commissioning period where there isn't a lot of time to acclimatise but there *is* a lot of pressure to get the system started up and running smoothly, and to ensure that the plant operations teams are well trained and comfortable with independent operation.

A typical example is a recent project in Vietnam where Virdus Consult was contracted to perform commissioning of a filtration system for a one of the world's top three brewing companies. Members of the commissioning team working on various parts of the brewery were of different nationalities: German, Dutch, Italian, Venezuelan, Peruvian, Croatian, South African, English, New Zealanders, and of course Vietnamese. The western team members had a relatively similar project and business culture, so the challenges of cultural difference existed but were limited. The real cultural awareness requirement became obvious when the western culture mixed with the Vietnamese culture.

Western culture would generally follow the 80-20 principle in tackling projects, in other words get the biggest and most important issues out of the way to get the system up and running and once up and running one can focus on the smaller details. This makes sense to western project teams as, generally, to get a project done on time, we tend not to focus too much on the small and less significant details that could be dealt with at a later stage in an attempt to get the critical items ticked off as soon as possible. To the Vietnamese, this way of working seems to result in a less trustworthy system. They place an incredible amount of focus on the details, and all faults or problems, however minor, should be resolved immediately. On top of that, the seemingly direct and abrupt Vietnamese communication style makes western project team members feel uneasy and, on top of that, the language barrier seems to worsen the situation.

One could compare this to the cat and dog relationship. Generally, dogs have a body language that seems aggressive to cats even though the dog just wants to be friendly. The cat would thus react in a fearful, non-trusting way which leads to the meeting ending in an unfriendly exchange, maybe even ending in injured parties, if not physically, then psychologically. So, how do we overcome this barrier?

There are three very simple and basic rules to follow that will at least assist those who are less culturally aware with a basis from which to begin. For a more academic perspective on the importance of cultural intelligence in project management, refer to the article on the PMI website titled: *Culturally Intelligent Project Management* (link provided at the bottom of this article).

1. **“When in Rome do as the Romans do”** or at least keep in mind that you are in someone else’s territory, not your own. Trying to enforce home principles in another country can damage relationships and cause project inefficiencies due to misunderstanding and miscommunication.

2. **Keep your communication simple and easy to understand.** Often the project’s language is selected to simplify life for all parties, but that sometimes means that the language used is not your first language, neither that of the client. Remember to check if what has been communicated has been properly understood without insulting the communication abilities of the other party. As an example, when learning Spanish, the language coach will normally teach learners to throw away the pronouns such as Yo (I) or ella (she) when using the correct form of the verb. The problem with non-native speakers is that they make mistakes with verb selection or placement of the exclamation on the correct syllable of the verb. Generally, Spanish people are very understanding even when one makes grave grammar mistakes, but to ensure that they understand more clearly what one intends to say, it is best to use the pronouns. By doing this, the native speaker is easily guided to what is meant instead of having to guess whether one is talking about oneself in the past tense or someone else in the present.

3. **Don’t take things personally.** Clients can get loud. And often they verbalise things in a manner that, in your culture, may be considered extremely blunt and even aggressive. In their culture this may be acceptable and not insulting. Could they be more understanding of the project personnel’s culture? Sure, but don’t expect this. It’s up to you to be the more accommodating person and stay calm and cool. By staying professional and providing stability in any encounter, your clients will eventually respond positively and potentially hurtful interactions will be kept to a minimum.

Links and References:

Culturally Intelligent Project Management: <https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/cultural-awareness-effective-communication-stakeholders-1416>