

# Mission-critical: Why the Kick-off is the Most Important Meeting in the Life of Your International Project

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*Jennie Jones was very excited about leading her first international project. She had led several successful domestic projects, working with team members in a variety of US locations, and was confident that she could handle this new challenge.*

*In planning the kick-off meeting for her new project team, she decided to hold it in the US and made arrangements for the project team members in India and Singapore to participate virtually. The meeting was scheduled for 8 am. She knew this timing might be a bit inconvenient for Indian and Singaporean team members, so she assured them they could call/log in from home.*

*In preparation for the meeting, Jennie sent a slide set detailing the objectives of the project, the reporting structure, critical milestones, and a tentative list of risks. She had heard of surprises experienced by her colleagues when working with international projects, so she summarized her expectations, making it very clear how much she hated surprises and urging team members to point out any problems right away.*

*During the kick-off meeting, Jennie welcomed everyone to the project and communicated her excitement about the potential results and about working with team members in Singapore and India. She reviewed her successes as a project leader and assured the team that this project would be successful as well. She then went through the slides she sent, reiterated her expectations about speaking up about problems of any kind, and asked for questions. A few on the US team asked questions. There were no questions from India or Singapore. Jennie then addressed those teams directly, asking specifically if there was anything in the material, or in anything she had said, which they did not understand. When no one indicated misunderstanding, she asked if there was anything in the plan they thought should be changed. Since there was no response, she thanked everyone and closed the meeting.*

*About a week later, Jennie received a call from her boss. A colleague of his had just been in Singapore and found that the Singaporean manager who held ultimate responsibility for Jennie's local team was very upset about the way Jennie handled the kick-off meeting. Investigating further, her boss heard similar comments from the manager of the Indian team. Jennie's boss wanted to know how she had managed to upset two key business partners, who had no contact with each other, in one short meeting.*

*Jennie, totally confused, wondered the same thing.*

Project kick-off meetings are critical because they impact how motivated and committed the team members are and how well they understand what is expected of them. Done right, a kick-off meeting generates excitement, begins development of a common

understanding about the project, and defines ways of working together to reach common goals. It also sets the tone for the complex dance of expectations and negotiations required for dynamic collaborative work. Done poorly, kick-off meetings discourage and confuse project teams, and generate doubt and mistrust among the members and their superiors. In a domestic project, conducting a kick-off meeting poorly is a problem. In an international setting, it can doom the project to failure.

### **International Kick-off Meetings**

A kick-off meeting in an international setting has the same sets of goals as in a domestic one. Successful project kick-off meetings will:

1. Generate excitement about the project and the opportunity to work with the team members and customers involved.
2. Begin educating project team members on the opportunity, the targeted results, and the way they will work together to get the job done.
3. Provide project team members with a comforting understanding of what they can expect, and what will be expected of them, as a member of the project.

International kick-off meetings have the additional goals of building relationships, alleviating fears, communicating new ways of working, accommodating language differences, all while being sensitive to the differing values of the cultures involved. Consequently, international kick-off meetings require more preparation and greater communication skills than those for domestic projects.

### **Four Vital Components**

Successful international kick-off meetings are best organized around four critical components: A compelling vision, clear priorities and ground rules, an effective communication plan, and a description of the structure and responsibility assignments for the project. Each of these has to be designed and presented to accommodate the additional complexities created by differences in location, language and culture.

#### **A Compelling Vision**

A compelling vision is best presented in a way that demonstrates the passion of the project leader, both for the project outcomes and for the opportunity to work with the people involved. The vision component should explain how the project fits into the goals and strategies of the larger organization. It should be understandable and repeatable, so that project members can explain it to colleagues and friends. Finally, it should inspire people to work together to achieve the desired results. It is the vision that typically generates the initial excitement (or lack thereof) for a project.

In international settings, it is important to remember that what works well in one culture does not necessarily transfer to another. For example, a competitive, financially based vision (“we will be the first to market and make a fortune”) may be exciting in some cultures and be seen as crass in others. Some cultures and

organizations will be inspired by contributing to a body of knowledge, others by working on break-through technology, and still others by making the world a better place. It is best to include a number of potentially inspiring reasons why the project is a worthwhile endeavor.

The vision presentation should be done in simple language that easily translates. A good practice is to have the vision statement itself translated into all of the native languages of the people involved. When presenting it, it is also important to avoid the impression that the important work is only being done in the project manager's home country. Local ownership is a critical motivation factor in international project success.

### Clear Priorities and Ground Rules

The first rule in international projects is to assume that there are very few commonalities in the ways people communicate and manage work. Ignoring or minimizing differences creates miscommunication and alienation. Clear priorities and ground rules help minimize confusion and frustration, but only if accompanied by diligent follow up in the first months of the project to ensure that these practices are followed and that they are not alienating members of any of the cultures involved.

A first step is for the project manager to work with subordinate managers, identifying key risks, and developing a preliminary plan for the project. New ways of work require strong support and enforcement from the local managers in all countries involved. Listening carefully for indicators that these managers are not comfortable with the rules or systems being established is critical. If they don't make it work, it won't work, regardless of how much power the project manager has on the organization chart.

The priorities and ground rules discussion needs to cover key trade-offs and how those will affect decision making, and explain how teams will work together, how work will be done, how decisions will be tracked, when and how change decisions will be made, and how the teams will relate to each other. Examples should include specific "what if's," reinforcing how important the ground rules are to the success of the project.

### Effective Communication Plan

The communication plan must be a living document that receives constant reviews and updates. It describes in detail exactly how everyone will be kept on track with timely information. The document identifies the key communication requirements and risks in the project and the strategies to mitigate those risks. This is a good place to explain the differences in communication styles and preferences across cultures, including the risk of not recognizing the true intent behind a message. People from direct, task-oriented cultures, like the US, are likely to offend colleagues from Singapore or India. Similarly, attempts from members of these more relationship-oriented, indirect communication cultures to convey concerns or issues are likely to be ignored simply because they aren't recognized. The project manager will do well to ask everyone to pay attention to these differences and give each other the benefit of

the doubt. Beyond that, the project manager's leadership is critical to bridge these cultural gaps. He or she can encourage persistence on the side of indirect team members and restraint on the side of direct ones, give teams from group-oriented cultures time to talk as a group before expecting answers, and ask open questions that solicit feedback from teams who are more comfortable with less direct communication. In working with group-oriented cultures, the practice of raising issues on a phone call and then giving time for the team to discuss often improves the quality of, and commitment to, the subsequent decision.

The communication plan needs to articulate an escalation path, explaining exactly how decisions a team cannot resolve will be escalated to those who can. It is very important that this is not a home country centric process. The way in which the escalation path is laid out should communicate respect for subordinate managers and for the professional expertise available on the project team around the world. It is a good idea to explain the reasoning behind the defined escalation path and when to use it.

### Structure and Responsibilities

This section presents and explains the organizational chart for the project. It communicates who is responsible for what in the project and should include the next level of detail in the form of some kind of responsibility chart. Both documents must be developed in conjunction with the managers of each country team and might need to reflect differing approaches to leadership. In the US, the responsibilities of each individual team member are usually clearly identified, while in group-oriented, more authoritarian cultures those responsibilities are often best assigned to the manager of the team. The goal is to present a structure that is understandable, likely to succeed, and that serves to mitigate the very real risks of the teams diverging into non-compatible work products because communication is difficult.

### **Don't Stop There: Other Factors You Must Consider**

Decisions about where to hold an international kick-off meeting, who will attend, and who gets to speak are serious issues because of the messages those choices can send. If the smallest team is in the home company country, and even if it is not, the project manager should seriously consider holding the meeting in one of the other countries involved. The project is best served by introducing and praising all subordinate managers, and allowing them to speak in some way.

### **Conclusions**

Jennie's kick-off meeting failed because she didn't know what she didn't know. Had she done her homework, she would have found that both India and Singapore are relationship-oriented, group-oriented cultures whose members prefer indirect

communication and respect leaders who are somewhat authoritarian. In the States, the assumptions that drove Jennie's approach to the kick-off meeting may not have been correct, but they would have been reasonable. Addressing individuals directly, asking for immediate feedback, and giving people the opportunity to ask clarifying questions typically works in the U.S. In this case, though, the project manager was working with members of other cultures who were critical for the project's success.

If someone comes off as arrogant, or scattered, or inconsiderate in a domestic meeting, a concerned project team member can typically find someone who defends, or at least explains, the project manager's behavior, listing some of his or her successes and providing strategies on how to work well under that person's direction. In an international project, where misinterpretations of both intentions and competence are much more likely, such colleagues are rarely available. Since team members and their supervisors commonly interpret behaviors within their cultural framework, there was probably strong consensus in our case that Jennie is arrogant, rude, a poor leader, and not likely to value the work of her foreign colleagues. Not a recipe for success in any culture!

Successful international project leaders know that the kick-off meeting is their best opportunity to establish a vision that is shared by all project team members, set and communicate clear priorities and ground rules, roll out a communication plan that will keep everyone informed about everything they need to know, and align their team on structures and responsibilities in ways that foster international team collaboration. In doing so, they constantly address and adjust to the differences in location, language and culture that make international projects so challenging.



**Sue Freedman, Ph.D. and Lothar Katz** are the creators and primary instructors of Managing Projects Across Borders™, a series of three workshops on Leading International Projects and International Project Organizations. *Managing International Projects* and *Negotiating and Working with International Customers, Suppliers and Other Partners* are offered as public workshops through the University of Texas at Dallas' Project Management Program. *Leading International Project Organizations* is currently taught only as an in-house offering. For information on these workshops, visit [ManagingProjectsAcrossBorders.com](http://ManagingProjectsAcrossBorders.com). Sue and Lothar also teach in the Executive Education Project Management MBA Program at the University of Texas at Dallas.

Sue specializes in the people and organizational aspects of projects and project based organizations. She spent 12 years with Texas Instruments, serving as Manager of Organizational Effectiveness at the Division and Corporate level and 2 years as Vice-President of Organizational Development and Human Resources in a large real estate investment trust. She is a co-author of *Beyond Teams: Building the Collaboration Organization* (Jossey-Bass, 2003) and author of "Managing Virtual Teams that Cross Borders" in *The Handbook on Virtual Teams* (Jossey Bass, 2008). Sue is a frequent presenter/trainer at professional conferences, and through Webinars and in house training programs.

Lothar specializes in several aspects of international business. He is a former Vice President and General Manager with Texas Instruments. During his 18-year corporate career, Lothar managed large distributed product development organizations across the U.S., Germany, India, China, Japan, and Australia. His extensive interactions with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world included many parts of Asia. Originally from Germany, he has lived and worked both in the United States and in Europe. Lothar also serves as a Business Leadership Center instructor at Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business and is the author of *Negotiating International Business – The Negotiator's Reference Guide to 50 Countries around the World* (BookSurge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2007).

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