

Winning Project Team Support: Establishing Trusting Relationships Across Borders

By Sue Freedman and Lothar Katz

Alan, an American project manager, assumed leadership of a project that included an Indian team with responsibility for a vital project component. Eager to start right with his new project members, Alan set up an individual conference call with each of the Indian team members. He always made such calls when new members joined his team, including those born in India, and found the conversations informative, interesting, and conducive to team cohesion. To his surprise, Alan's calls with his Indian team members, who spoke excellent English, were awkward and frustrating. The team members seemed to be hiding something, did not answer any direct questions, and acted as if they could not wait to get off the phone. Alan hung up frustrated and a bit insulted. After all, he had taken time out of his busy schedule to talk with each one of them, and they acted as if they did not want to be bothered.

Juri, a project manager in Finland, received an email from Jay, a project manager employed in the American branch of their Finnish-owned company. The email delineated critical issues preventing the installation of a product for Jay's U.S.-based customer. When Juri didn't respond within 24 hours, he received another email, followed the next day by a phone call. Juri, away at a training seminar, missed all of these communications. When he returned, he emailed Jay that he would check on the issues and get back to him ASAP. The next day Jay called, asking for an update and explaining that they were losing money and customers because of the delays. Juri listened but found his American colleague quite rude. After three more calls from Jay, in which he became increasingly forceful, Juri complained to his management, who called his counterpart in the American branch, another Finn. They came up with a solution: Jay was no longer supposed to call the Finnish office directly. Jay ultimately left the company to work for an American one.

Anja, a German sales manager, traveled to China to meet with Mr. Ji, a potential customer for a powerful software tool. Because she had limited time, she sent ahead some promotional materials and prepared a detailed plan of the key selling points she needed to make during her meeting. Anja knew a great deal about the Mr. Ji's business and how her product could improve its profitability. When she arrived, she met briefly with Mr. Ji, who was very gracious but quickly handed her off to a subordinate for a tour of their facility. Anja was forced to see the whole plant, even though what she was selling was not related to most of what she was shown. She tried to steer the conversation to her product and to some of the challenges the company faced that could be better met by her product, but the tour guide seemed to avoid the subject. At the end of tour, she was taken for tea and the conversation became very personal. They discussed families, education, what Anja planned to see while in China, and what she thought of the country. A very similar

conversation took place over a dinner that evening. It involved ten people she thought were subordinates of Mr. Ji, with their spouses. They all pounded her with very personal questions, asking why she wasn't married and whether she wanted to have children. She suspected that she was just taken along to a party that had been planned all along, and that Mr. Ji and his company had no interest in doing business with her. She was angry that they had wasted so much of her time. Mr. Ji, on the other hand, thought she was a poor listener, not interested in getting to know the people she was going to work with, and lacked the discipline needed to be a good provider for their company.

The failures and frustration in these stories result from differences in how members of different cultures build and manage relationships with business colleagues: peers, superiors, subordinates, customers, or suppliers. Each person in our examples behaved in ways that are respected and valued in their home culture. Unfortunately, in these all too common examples, each of the participants ended up frustrated, confused, and discouraged.

Learning to work successfully across cultures involves recognizing key cultural differences and adapting to those differences in ways that enable meaningful communication. As project and program managers, we have to model this adaptive behavior and create an environment that allows our diverse project members to work through their differences and jointly create new ways of work.

The following paragraphs describe strategies and tools that help in building productive cross-cultural relationships. The discussion is organized around three aspects, 1) understanding the expectations of your cross-cultural partners, 2) determining the relevant values and behavioral norms of those partners, and 3) building relationships that are based on clarity and mutual trust.

1. Understand the Expectations of Your Cross-Cultural Partners

Trust, at some level, is required for all business relationships. We need to believe that the person with whom we are working is competent and has positive intentions towards us. Doubts in either of these areas affect the relationship and often jeopardize business or project results. This is true for individuals across all cultures. What differs across cultures and individuals is how much familiarity, trust, and goodwill are needed for people to work together effectively. Also different are the specific behaviors on which people judge whether someone is worthy of their trust. In the Chinese-German example, indicators of competence and positive intentions were very different. Anja was looking for interest in and conversation about her product. She assumed that a competent leader would be interested in a product that would improve his company's profitability, taking the time to find out if her product could do what she promised. Mr. Ji, on the other hand, was looking for a supplier committed to establishing the personal relationships needed to work with employees of his company. Neither found what they were looking for, not because they were not capable of providing it, but because their expectations, values, and timing around building the business relationship were so different.

In choosing a business partner, it is important to understand the requirements for establishing the trust between the partners and the expectations of what doing business together entails. In most cultures, that means building personal relationships of some kind. It also means achieving a level

of trust and an attention to the feelings of one's counterparts that is foreign to American and most other Western cultures. Jay, the American project manager working for the Finnish company, had no intention of offending his Finnish colleague; he simply was communicating his concerns in ways that are perfectly acceptable, sometimes even rewarded, in U.S. corporations. In the States, people are expected to be passionate about taking care of their customers and getting their projects done on time.

In international business and project work, it is crucial first to understand what your foreign counterparts expect. Otherwise, it is impossible to evaluate the wisdom of choosing a sales strategy, picking a partner, or selecting a project team for a project task. For example, Anja, the German sales manager, expected to sell her product and then move on to her next sale, following up from time to time to be sure expectations were being met and to check for opportunities to sell more products. She did not expect to establish a close relationship with Mr. Ji and his company. Alan, in contacting his Indian team members, expected to establish rapport quickly and get on to a discussion about the project. Those expectations were not matched well to those of their respective counterparts, as anyone familiar with the Chinese and Indian cultures would have known up front.

Business relationships tend to progress between stages, from contact to potential partner, partner, trusted partner and close friend. In China, many other Asian countries, most of the Arab world, and in South America, doing business effectively typically requires that the relationship be one of trusted partner or close friend. The time it takes to develop such a close relationship is considerable, requiring a great deal of contact over a significant period of time. Members of these cultures will probably not do business with people whom they don't like (or who they think don't like them). In the U.S., on the other hand, people move from contact to partner very quickly, requiring almost no personal relationships to engage in business. Most people in the U.S. will do business with someone they don't particularly like or trust; even when there is strong mistrust or outright dislike between counterparts, they may still conduct business together.

Crossing the cultural boundaries in international partnerships is difficult for both sides. It is vital that both partners strive to recognize and meet the essential expectations on the other side. When it comes to relationship building, it is often easier for one side to try harder to build a strong one than it is for their counterpart to live with a 'superficial' business relationship with someone they do not fully trust.

2. Determine Relevant Values and Behavioral Norms of Your Partners

Some level of trust in the intentions and competency of a business colleague is an essential requirement in all cultures. People have to believe that there are shared goals and that the person with whom they are working has the knowledge and skill required to achieve those goals. In the situations described in our introductory stories, each of the participants began to question the intentions and/or competence of their cross-cultural counterparts, interpreting the behaviors they witnessed based on their own values and cultural norms. A U.S. team member who was uncomfortable talking to his or her project manager would be a cause for concern. An Indian project manager who talked directly to a subordinate without first contacting that person's direct supervisor would be suspect in terms of intentions and competence. Similarly, a German

customer spending extensive time on small talk and not discussing the issues at hand would be seen as strange and disinterested in the product.

To determine likely values, expectations, and the behaviors needed to accommodate those, we suggest that you start by researching the culture of your foreign colleagues or customers on four critical cultural dimensions: Task vs. relationship orientation, group vs. individual orientation, power distance and direct vs. indirect communication preferences. Each of these is discussed below.

- ◆ Task vs. relationship orientation can be explained as the relative value one puts on maintaining the relationship, as opposed to getting the job done. These are not necessarily opposites, but when trade-offs occur, members of some cultures focus on relationships when members of others view getting things done as more important. The U.S. has the strongest task orientation in the world, while India, China, Mexico, and the United Arab Emirates, among many others, tend to be much more relationship-oriented. A strong relationship orientation means that people will take the time to get to know someone as a person; they need that time and personal communication to develop working relationships. Members of strongly task-oriented cultures, on the other hand, look for on-the-job communication to be mostly work related and prefer to build relationships in the context of getting work done. They may be confused by what they see as irrelevant discussions, questioning the competence or commitment of those who want to spend time establishing strong relationships up front. Task-oriented cultures focus on establishing business relationships by demonstrating competence, while relationship-oriented cultures value the demonstration of positive intentions much more highly. The vast majority of cultures in the world are relationship-oriented.
- ◆ Egalitarian vs. authoritarian orientation, commonly described as low or high ‘power distance’, refers to one’s attitude toward people of higher status or those holding positions of authority. This cultural dimension suggests how members of a culture treat their leaders and how they expect people in leadership roles to behave. What is seen as admirable behavior in a leader in a highly egalitarian culture may be seen as weak or ineffective in a more authoritarian one. It is important to respect the role of authority in a culture. Mexico, China, and the UAE are highly authoritarian cultures, while Australia, Denmark, and Sweden are highly egalitarian. The U. S. is also on the egalitarian side, though to a lesser degree than others. Failure to recognize and adhere to power distance values can seriously damage a cross-cultural relationship.
- ◆ Group vs. individual orientation refers to the relative importance members of a culture assign to groups versus individuals in decision-making and in dealing with the opportunities and challenges of life. Members of group-oriented cultures tend to value their group’s collective beliefs and practices more highly than individual interests. Decision making in such cultures may require reaching consensus among all group members. In contrast, individualistic cultures place greater emphasis on individual interests and independence. Members of group-oriented cultures living in individually-oriented cultures often comment on how lonely they see the lifestyle and how separated everyone is. Members of individually oriented cultures may be shocked by the complex set of family and friendship-related responsibilities in group-oriented cultures. China is one of the most strongly group-oriented cultures in the world. Mexico, the United Arab Emirates, Japan, and India are also group-

oriented, while Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom are the highest in individual orientation.

- ◆ A final critical component is the way people from different cultures communicate. This is sometimes referred to as direct vs. indirect communication. Indirect communication is much more nuanced, more subtle and much more sensitive to the relative positions and the feelings of the participants. Indirect communication can be confusing and frustrating for those raised to speak more directly, while direct communication is often perceived as rude and insulting by those used to a more indirect approach. Israel, Germany, France, and the U.S. are direct cultures, while communication in China, India, Mexico, and especially in Japan, is usually very indirect.

A country's relative placement on the dimensions of individualism vs. group orientation, task vs. relationship orientation, and power distance can be found at http://www.geert-hofstede.com/geert_hofstede_resources.shtml, along with more information on the topics of culture and work relationships.

If any of your colleagues belong to the same culture as your project team members, talk to them. In addition, talk with anyone who has worked with this team or organization before. Each of these colleagues will have valuable information that will save you time and frustration.

3. Build Relationships Based On Clarity And Trust

Working across borders involves creating new ways of working together for all participants. In order to make it work, there has to be a commitment to suspend judgment and a willingness to work through the confusing messages and mismatched expectations that characterize cross-cultural collaboration. People who are new to such a project environment often ask why “they” don't adapt to us. The truth is that in cross-cultural work settings, everyone is adapting all the time. If your native culture is task-oriented, your strongest relationship-building behavior may still fall very short of the preferences of your relationship-oriented colleagues. If your own culture favors indirect communication, then you are likely to feel criticized or even insulted from time to time by your more direct colleagues. What is important is that you each understand the differences and are committed to working through the confusion and making your project successful. As we all know, nothing builds teams like success.

The following paragraphs summarize attitudes and practices that have proven successful in international projects.

- ◆ Maintain both personal and professional relationships. The importance of maintaining a personal and professional relationship continues for the life of the relationship. In cross-cultural relationships, maintaining a mutual belief in the partner's good intentions and competence requires constant nurturing. Members of task-oriented cultures have to find ways to indicate to their relationship-oriented colleagues that they are respected and valued. Members of relationship-oriented cultures, on the other hand, need to be more aggressive in seeking opportunities and demonstrating their competence when working with their task-oriented colleagues.

Strategies that help build strong personal relationships include sharing pictures (your own and your family's), celebrating birthdays and marriage anniversaries, showing respect for vacation schedules, holidays, and time zones differences, and other efforts that indicate an interest in the person. Strategies that help build strong professional relationships, and help signal competence to members of task-oriented cultures, include resume and experience sharing, successful collaboration around preventing or correcting project issues, staying positive about the project, and keeping commitments. It is important to remember, however, that you cannot build professional relationships with members of relationship-oriented cultures unless you establish and maintain strong personal connections.

- ◆ Provide support and structure. Project leaders working with foreign team members need to provide more clarity and more support than when working with a domestic team. Establishing detailed responsibility charts, comprehensive communication policies, and specific reporting requirements, all of them with gentle but clear sanctions when team members fails to comply, is critical. Because work and communication practices are often so different, and because language differences represent huge challenges, training team members to work together effectively is important. They need strong encouragement to spend the time and energy necessary to get greater clarity on expectations and issues than is likely to be comfortable or common for either side.

International project teams members also need more support and guidance than is required in a domestic project. Project teams from a minority culture in the project can be easily discouraged—and when that happens, work can become slow or even stop altogether. Team members from the dominant or majority culture also need additional support and guidance. It is very common for members of the majority culture, especially those lacking adequate preparation, to become frustrated by, and then abusive to, their foreign teammates. Leaders who acknowledge the challenges, sympathize with the frustration, and work to build a strong sense of one team have a much better chance of success.

- ◆ Never take 'yes' for an answer. When you ask foreign colleagues from indirect, group-oriented and/or highly-authoritarian cultures, they are likely to respond with what they think you want to hear or with answers that protect their team members or their boss. If you are from a "direct" culture, you will need to learn to look for subtle clues hinting at disagreements or other issues, as well as to ask open-ended questions that force more specific answers. "Please email a summary of what you see as the three biggest risks in this schedule and how we can manage those" is a good way of inquiring about schedule risk; "Is everything on track?" is not. You also want to schedule frequent reviews, check points, reports, etc. that make sure that accurate information about project progress and issues is available.
- ◆ Assume competence and good intentions. As mentioned, it is easy to underestimate someone's competence and to misinterpret behaviors as negatively motivated when working across cultures. Germans and the French often ask difficult questions and may find arguing a useful form of discussion. They mean no offense by employing such behavior, so try not to assume otherwise. Similarly, someone's failure to respond to an email is not necessarily a sign of incompetence or a lack of commitment; it may well mean that your foreign colleagues assign lower priority to emails and assume that you will call if the issue is

important. You may want to change your habits around email and other practices that are critical to cross-border project success. In any case, refrain from assigning motives and interpreting behaviors unless you are sure you understand the others' culture well.

The above discussion describes some of the best practices emerging from the international project and program leaders who excel in cross-cultural environments. Pioneers in this arena are defining what works, what doesn't work, and how members of diverse cultures engage in project-based collaborative work. Hopefully, we are learning to take the best from each of the cultures involved, creating better products and services, and building more effective and more nurturing work environments in the process.



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. 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.

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