



Flexible Leadership to Lead Projects in Multicultural Settings

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Abstract

There has been a trend in the industry to establish partnership with local companies as joint ventures often collaborating with local companies. This has led to rise of multicultural project teams with teams from different background and culture. Not only are the teams multicultural, they are spread geographically across different time zones in different political settings. Using local work force can be source of strength where experience in local setting and innovative thinking can provide competitive advantage. At the same time motivating team comprising of members belonging to different culture becomes a challenge to project success. There are various factors to project success. This paper analyzes team dynamics in a multicultural project setting and leadership style of the project manager to lead his team in order to deliver quality project on time. Globalisation has brought highly unstable circumstances with constantly changing team and task needs. Leadership style exhibited by the project manager will determine how team diversity is managed eventually making it a highly productive or low productive team.

Introduction

A project is characterized by a specific purpose or objective which has to be completed by a certain date for a certain amount of money with expected level of performance. Projects may have simple objective but call for diverse skills and many resources. The objective of the project manager is to deliver completed project on time, within budget according to customer specification. Success of the project plan and its execution depends upon the team implementing it. Effectiveness of the team depends on technical skills of the members as well as the chemistry among the team members (Rober K Wysocki et al). A project team has three separate components

- Project manager
- Core team
- Contracted team

The project manager represents the project to the organization and to external groups. In order to achieve the goal, the Project manager must get team members cooperation and support without having direct authority over them. Over the course of the project, the project manager will interact with team, managers in the organization, the customer and outside contractors. These interactions will involve project manager's interpersonal skill in areas such as negotiation, conflict resolution and problem

resolution. It emphasizes project manager's skill as leader as well as his/ her ability to link the project to the strategy of the organization.

The core team members have skill set that has broad applicability across the range of work. The core team is usually part of the early definition and planning of the project. Each core team member has to put high priority on fulfilling his/ her role, adapt to the situation and give trust and mutual support in order to make an effective team.

Organisations are routinely outsourcing processes that are not part of their core business or core expertise. These contracted team members may be a part of the project for a short period of time when their skill is required. Commitment which affects the quality towards the project becomes a big issue since the contracted team members want to finish their job and move on. These factors require leadership qualities to build and manage a diverse team.

Apart from the specific technical skills that team members bring to the team, they need to have competence, clear and common goal, commitment to the common goal in order to make project successful.

Impact of culture on team performance

To understand the difference between domestic and global management, it is important to understand cultures around the world and the way they shape the society (R G Ghattas et al). Culture impacts an individual's personality, decision making, values, motivation, cross cultural communication, leadership and negotiation. Culture affects an individual's way of thinking, his perception and interaction with the world. The values that an individual grows up with determine their perception of acceptable behavior in any given situation.

Danger of assumption

1. Communication problems- Communication is a complex process and all sorts of interpersonal elements may enter into the problem. Also there is a great deal of variety in the way people process information and the media they prefer. It is important that work groups agree on certain rules of communication, such as everyone is expected to give input in meetings; conflict is to be brought out and resolved; problems are to be resolved etc. Dealing with people from culture where English is second language it will be good to teach employee to verify meaning.
2. Language- language difference becomes obvious when an employee speaks in broken English. Pause in between a conversation is viewed differently in different cultures. If English is not a person's first language, misunderstanding may occur no matter how fluent the speaker is.

Even if an employee speaks fluently in English, it cannot be assumed that he/ she may have comprehended everything. Conversely what the manager heard might not be same as what he/she meant.

3. Country of origin- Automatically attributing characteristics or ethnic labels is not liked when it is an incorrect assumption.
4. Attitude- Some team members make a respectful but clear demarcation between work commitment and interpersonal closeness. An employee may be reluctant to communicate because of lack of language skills. Jumping to conclusion about an employee from another country who does not seem to be

interested in becoming one of the group does more harm than good. His/ her dedication to task may be strong but cultural differences may make socializing awkward.

Potential issues in culturally diverse work team

It is human tendency to assume some sort of aggressive intent or generalized ignorance when we meet someone who looks or behaves differently than us. Some likely areas of misinterpretation are:

The way respect is shown- In some cultures direct eye contact is considered a challenge to authority while in others direct eye contact means trust. Another area where respect becomes an issue is in the manner in which one affirms the person in an interaction. Many cultures are careful not to cause any embarrassment for anyone. For a leader working with diverse team, a short seminar or discussion on what makes employees respectful is helpful.

The way conflict is handled- conflict is a socially accepted behavior that needs to be addressed in a professional environment. In case of a conflict, differences in approach add to the problem.

Many cultures give group needs a priority over individual needs whereas others place high value on interdependence. When an individual with a view towards winning, controlling and leading, encounters a harmonizing behavior often interprets it as lack of assertiveness. Problem solving sessions present another potential difficulty with a harmonizer since they tend to redirect conversation rather than disagree or offer a negative response. Project manager must keep an eye on this behavior since agreement may just mean a reluctance to make waves, not a belief that agreed upon solution is acceptable.

The requirement one has for personal space- Personal space requirement varies from culture to culture. Touching conveys some kind of informality which is considered inappropriate in some cultures. Discomfort with violations of personal space is a subtle intolerance which can be taken care of by indoctrinating the new employee about the concept of personal space and finding out their expectations about it as well.

The work ethic one holds- Value placed on work varies from person to person. In some countries, workday is from dawn to dusk, others a 2 hour lunch break is considered revitalizing. Differences in work style calls for working with each other to ensure commitment is not so different in a culturally diverse group.

Gaining an insight into work styles does not solve diversity management problems but keeps to understand what people can and will do. Making assumptions about degree of commitment or the competence of an employee based on perception is an error.

The speed at which business or conversation is conducted- Some cultures take time during introduction to familiarize themselves with people they are meeting while some rush it off with a handshake. Some cultures view brainstorming as pointless waste of time whereas others feel unstructured free flowing idea sessions help in solving complex problems. This does not pose a problem in a diverse team but understanding individual's perception of appropriate rate will help ensure success.

Table 1: Cross-cultural Implications – Asian and the West (Bhagat et al 2002)

Cross-culture Dimension	Implications		
	Asian Perspective	American Perspective	Implications
Language	Not that complicated to the Asian. Foreigners should have more respect and learn the language.	English is the international business language so everyone should use it.	It is generally good practice to “localize” materials when feasible. Local words and expressions sometime just do not properly translate for English and may actually be offensive.
Individualism vs. Collectivism	Strong Collectivism - The Asians depend more on groups or institutions to determine what they should do and emphasize loyalty to the group. They are more likely to cooperate with others to avoid risks and reduce responsibilities. Their value systems appreciate duty to the group and harmony among its members while pursuing personal goals is viewed rather negatively in Asia.	Strong Individualism - They rely on their own view to determine what they should do. They tend to work alone and are reluctant to cooperate because their individualism and masculine culture view cooperation in general as a sign of weakness and place a high value on independence and control	A focus on team activities and collaboration vs. individual competitive activities is preferred.
Cooperation	The Asian person does not consider contracts as seriously as the Americans. They think there will always be changes and the contracts can be reasonably modified according to changes. Instead, they tend to pay	Americans place greater importance on contractual safeguards than the Asian. They believe that contracts can ensure that their partners' tendencies to focus on individual goals and aspirations	Nothing is cast in stone for the Asians. Authority is seldom, if ever, challenged. But when encouraged and trust is gained by the instructor, students will interact better, and challenge

	more attention to relationships than contracts.	do not interfere with their own individual goals and aspirations.	each other in a negotiative manner as not to create a "save face" problem. This takes much longer that you will ever plan – so take time to let the process work itself through. Asian employees seldom have the chance to really participate in the decision-making process. So activities requiring decisions may well take longer.
Masculinity/Femininity	Medium Femininity – To deal with a difficult or controversial request, indirect forms of influence are preferred by Asian managers to avoid losing face and damaging relationships.	Medium Masculinity – Western partners may get totally confused by the roundabout way the Asians use to solve seemingly simple problems. The different ways that Chinese and American managers resolve conflicts seem to find support from Weaver's finding that feminine societies prefer to resolve conflict through negotiation and compromise (Weaver, 2000).	As noted in the other categories above, while team activities are critical to success of a course, the time allotted for all activities must be given a high priority.
Conflict Resolution	Personal relationships are emphasized. They will try to use indirect ways to avoid direct and open conflict. When they face conflict, they prefer to use authority to suppress it, or settle	American managers are used to confronting problems directly and bringing things out in the open. To resolve differences, American managers will prefer to use tactics that involve	Western business people will realize that while they "have the authority" to manage conflict it is not a license to kill. Extreme caution and skill is required to

	<p>things in private. They prefer to resolve conflict through negotiation and compromise. (Weaver, 2000).</p>	<p>directly confronting others with rational arguments, factual evidence, and suggested solutions (Ting-Toomey, 1985).</p>	<p>bring a group through conflict without causing save face issues. Time, time, time.</p>
<p>Work Group Characteristics</p>	<p>Asians are relational-oriented countries in which people place great importance on personal relationship. Living in a collectivism society, the Asians view people differently as "in-group" and "outgroup". They have much higher confidence in "in-group" members than "out-group" members. But the passing of time, and the development of relationship, the outgroup members may turn into ingroup members</p>	<p>American managers may encourage their group members to learn from each other, to focus on task rather than on social and interpersonal relations, and to build the confidence required for superior performance (Sosik and Jung, 2002). They place a much higher importance on the task or business deal and hope to focus very quickly on specific business matters. They are achievement oriented, that is "work first". They don't think establishing personal relationship is necessarily involved in the work.</p>	<p>Once teams are formed, changing members will create problems for the new member. Avoid this whenever possible.</p>
<p>Motivation Systems</p>	<p>Collectivistic cultures emphasize cooperation, interdependence, and group goals, and thus prefer plans that support group harmony (Aguinis, 2002). Most Asians believe that the sense of belonging to the group and devotion to the group are important. They hold the view that one's success</p>	<p>In American value systems, great emphasis is placed on individual achievement, and they are expected to achieve success only by their individual efforts. They value competition, achievement and personal goals, and therefore, desire</p>	<p>Motivate and encourage individuals one-on-one. Motivate and encourage all groups publicly unless the news is bad.</p>

	is mainly based on group work, so one cannot claim the reward just for oneself. In that case, the equality principle is reflected in the motivation system.	to have plans that recognize individual contributions.	
Uncertainty Avoidance	Risk-avoiding - Asians have higher values for uncertainty avoidance than USA, which shows that Asians are relatively risk-avoiding	Risk-taking - Americans are relatively risk-taking. USA has a short-term orientation while Asians have a long-term orientation	The tendency is to research, research, and research until there is more certainty on an issue or assignment. Again this takes more time than ever planned. No one wants to put the other team member down so certainty is best to “save face” within the collective.

Project Manager as a leader

Various factors like project planning, project manager and team members, top management support, effective communication are critical for project success. Traditionally a project is considered to be successful if it is finished on time, within stipulated budget with desired functional quality. ‘A project is an opportunity for team character development’. Developing relationship between the leader and his team with different backgrounds, needs and expectations transforms them into high performing, cohesive unit. Changing project needs in contrast to defined goals ask for a variety of leadership styles to lead the team towards completing in a fixed timescale and meet the challenges of management.

A project manager’s choice of his leadership style depends on (Guru Prakash Prabhakar 2006)

- Context problems where leader wants to make a decision himself
- Organization/ group pressure where conflict could arise
- Leader’s personality pressure

A leader has choice in style. Different situations call for different styles. Times may require leaders leader to be autocratic to meet organizational goal. At the same time managing a diverse team calls for team-based participative style. The leadership challenge is to meet organizational goals and make decisions in efficient and effective

way. The current global business environment has brought about a fundamental shift in thinking towards use of relationship power instead of position power.

Dynamic model directs that leaders move between four styles; directive, supportive, participative and achievement oriented. The style of leadership needs to change according to the context of a project as it progresses through its life cycle. In the project life cycle, the role of the project manager changes from manager to problem-solver to facilitate to communicator. Performance of a leader depends on two interrelated factors; the degree to which the situation gives the leader the control and also the leader's motivation towards task and relationships. A leader's ability to exert influence over the group depends on the 1) personal relations with the group (2) structuredness of the task to be performed (3) the positional power of the leader. Group performance depends on leadership style in terms of task motivation and relationship motivation. Effectiveness of leadership styles depends on the people who are to be led since they exhibit varying degrees of readiness. Maturity of the subordinates in terms of psychological maturity and job maturity will determine the leadership style (Guru Prakash Prabhakar 2006).

Building a constructive diverse climate

Highly changing business environment has brought about high levels of uncertainty, cross cultural teams, global competition making it difficult for the project manager. A healthy culture gives a competitive advantage. The current race-paced, technology driven business has created "the war for talent" due to which highly skilled people change jobs. In order for project plan to run smoothly, project managers must show their leadership quality of keeping people motivated and feel a part of the organization. Leaders must create a kind of affiliation that produces a pride and excitement about belonging to the organization and at the same time giving them an opportunity to express their ideas (Victor Sohmen et al.).

In a diverse team, people have the opportunity to improve the company by delivering ideas, listening to each other and working together across traditional, regional or national boundaries. Despite their differences, they are united under the banner of their company's bigger vision.

To gain competitive advantage, it is crucial to manage diversity. Hiring and retaining employees by understanding their needs and goals is an important factor. It becomes difficult to assess it when people belong to different cultures. Keeping an open mind about employee's needs is important but guessing it on perception can be disastrous since ambition is not (Jake Stewart 2006) seen in same in all the cultures. This is an important factor in keeping employees motivated and committed.

To lead a team from diverse culture and align their interest with company strategy, leader must focus on teamwork and alignment. Team members have their own very different cultures and way of doing business. Every organization has its own culture which may rate high or low on innovation and risk taking, attention to detail, outcome orientation, people orientation etc. The first and foremost thing a leader must focus is on encourage members to form a cohesive team to learn about and respect each other. Then he must develop trust and understanding and lead the team to work together to develop a tradition and then a set of values (Victor Sohmen et al.).

Studies have shown that people who feel good about themselves produce good results. Employees feel more motivated to work with someone who has positive attitude, enthusiastic, determined, confident, optimistic, dedicated and good listener (Jake

Stewart 2006). Empowering team members gives them confidence which helps overcome their fears and teaches them to deal with failure and learn from it. Reinforcing strengths builds trust, communication, loyalty, self-esteem and relationship with others. A leader who is open and sharing creates an environment of mutual trust and respect.

Leaders with positive attitude teach and inspire others to believe in themselves and others. Leaders taking an extra step to share their experiences create an environment for team members to make mistakes and benefit from them. Their attitude to welcome constructive criticism builds a team where members feel inclusive eventually leading to their strong, positive self image (A S Migs Damiani).

To compete with a global business force, where talent is a scarcity, leaders must revise their strategy, must pay attention to needs and interests of employees and create an environment to attract and retain these people. Greater opportunities to grow, learn and develop can excite and motivate people as well as give them chance to learn other jobs and advance laterally while increasing skill levels.

Conclusion

More and more projects are done involving experts from different nationalities. The diversity in such teams brings about its own set of challenges. In addition to cost, time and quality, the project team also needs to consider effect of time zone differences, national and religious holidays, travel requirements, logistics of teleconferencing and political differences. Multicultural team's productivity depends on the ways in which they manage their diversity. Diversity proves to be advantageous when creativity and agreement can be balanced. In a diverse team, the leader needs to be culturally sensitive to understand relations between people, motivational orientation, orientation toward risk, attitude towards time and other socio-cultural dimensions. To achieve project goals and avoid cultural misunderstandings, project managers should be culturally sensitive and promote creativity and motivation through flexible leadership. Understanding cultural differences can help project manager and teams take advantage of opportunities and manage the risks.

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