

Collaborating Across Cultures: Key to Success for Global Projects -- Part II

By Nancy Settle-Murphy, *Guided Insights*

This piece is the second of a three-part series that explores how global project teams can collaborate more successfully through better communications. Our featured company, while fictitious, represents a composite of many of the companies we have worked with.

Synopsis:

The future success of GenCo lies in the successful implementation of a major ERP initiative, code-named "Operation Unity." The project team consists of members from GenCo offices around the world. Neither project manager Mark Levenger nor his manager Jim Kingsley, both Americans, have had much experience working with people from other cultures. They know that for this project to succeed, they must work hard to bridge the cultural gaps between team members.

CIO Gretchen Baker recommended to Mark and Jim that they bring in Chrysalis International to provide advice and coaching in the area of cross-cultural communications. For the project launch meeting, we devoted an hour to some cross-cultural communications basics. At that time, we scheduled a follow-on meeting for two weeks later. We invited team members to provide us with incidents or examples that illustrated problems or areas of confusion, which would help us tailor the next session to provide some "just in time" learning.

Team members were certainly not shy about sharing examples of communications that caused them some amount of confusion, frustration and in some cases, anger. We received several e-mails, a few faxes, and about a half-dozen calls. Unless our "reporters" agreed otherwise, we assured them that their examples would be well disguised.

Here are some of the most frequent sources of misunderstandings and negative feelings we discovered in our two-week "intake" process:

- The Americans were regarded as being overly casual at the outset, both in their mannerisms as well as their dress. (In the U.S., GenCo had recently moved from "casual Fridays" to "casual everyday" except when customers were expected.) Said the German team member: "They are quite presumptuous. From the very first meeting, they referred to all of us by our first names. I know this is the American convention, but it not everyone is comfortable with this.")
- Both the Americans and the French member were criticized for their constant interruptions on both phone calls and videoconferences. In particular, the Japanese and Singaporean members felt this was disrespectful.
- The American, German and UK team members were found by others to be too hurried in their decision-making, and often made decisions with too little information. The other team

members preferred to take a more “holistic” view of each situation and then decide based on a variety of information from many sources.

- Many team members reported being confused by the fact that the Japanese team member *seemed* very compliant and happy to go along with whatever was proposed. In fact, he rarely if ever said “no” to anything. However, when it came time to execute what had been agreed, he often did not follow through.
- The German team member was seen as “very demanding” and sometimes rude in his requests. Some commented that he rarely smiled, and that he seemed abrupt and aloof.
- Many complained that all members seemed to operate by different schedules and had different definitions of “as soon as possible.” The French member attached considerably less urgency to meeting schedules than did the German, who expressed his frustration with the lack of punctuality exhibited by others.
- The French member thought the German and American members insisted on unnecessary detail in reports, memos and presentations. He confided that so many details might be masking the fact that the ideas were not grounded in “true logic.”
- Nearly all team members reported that they were puzzled when someone would insist he or she understood the other, when it turned out they did not. (Complained one of the Americans about the Singaporean member: “He always *says* he understands, but then when he tries to summarize in a memo, he has gotten it all wrong. Why don’t they just *say* they’re confused? We could clear things up much sooner.”)
- Just about all team members bemoaned the fact the Americans spoke far too quickly. Both the American and U.K. members were accused of using local idioms that made no sense to the rest. (Examples: Let me pick your brain. In full swing. Now we’re cooking with gas.) Americans were also criticized for using the kind of corporate jargon that might be lampooned in a *Dilbert* book. (This is difficult enough to decipher in English; imagine the confusion when trying to directly translate into another language!)
- The U.K. member could not understand why Mark had suggested they “table the discussion,” and then switched to a different topic. For her, “tabling a discussion” means to put it *on* the table and openly confront it. Meanwhile, when she kept referring to their project plan as a “scheme,” Mark felt this suggested that their plan was somehow devious.
- The Japanese member felt insulted when the UK member said she thought they their “minds were working in parallel.” In his English dictionary, “parallel” meant two lines that never meet.
- The Americans, Japanese and Singaporeans were all frustrated when the project plan had to accommodate so many holidays and vacations for the European team members. The month of August was considered out of bounds, as was much of July and December. How could they *ever* meet their project goals when some team members would be away for so long?

- Different conventions for conveying dates caused confusion. For Americans, August 9, 2005 might be written as 8/9/05. In most other cultures, this may be read September 8, 2005.
- Most references to currency were made in U.S. dollars. Although GenCo is a U.S.-based company, many team members said they would have appreciated the acknowledgment that other currencies do exist.

Training design

As we received each E-mail or call, we created categories for our upcoming training session. We pondered how best to help everyone understand the commonly-shared problems and the probable causes. We realized that our greatest challenge would be to openly acknowledge the problems — and offer solutions—without focusing on any nationality or individual.

We decided to take each of the most frequently-recurring problems, and provide a brief “probable cause” as well as suggested remedies. We knew we could only scratch the surface (a phrase we would certainly *not* be using with our audience!) in these two hours. So we decided at that point that our final session would delve more deeply into underlying causes. For both the second and the final sessions, we built in plenty of time for Q&As throughout the two hours.

In general, we took the “easiest” challenges first and worked our way down to some of the more delicate issues.

Challenge	Probable Cause	Recommendation
Dates	Different countries have different conventions	To avoid confusion, use abbreviations for months, vs. numeric representations. E.g., 8 Aug. 2005 or Aug. 8, 2005
Currency	U.S.-based companies tend to default to U.S. currency. In addition, most worldwide business publications use U.S. dollars as points of comparison.	When discussing currency with an international audience, indicate that you are using U.S. dollars vs. another dollar. Also, extend the courtesy of translating selected figures into local currencies. Choose one or two as examples.
Pitfalls of English translations	When directly translated into local languages, some English words take on altogether different meanings. Words that <i>sound</i> as though they have the same meaning can often cause the most damage.	Native English speakers should test for meaning constantly. Ask other team members to evaluate your recent memos, phone calls, etc. and provide feedback. Avoid any regional sayings or idioms that are likely to mean nothing elsewhere. Use short, simple words. Avoid metaphors and

		<p>similes, unless you are prepared to explain their meaning.</p> <p>Even Americans and Brits need to cross-check the meanings of commonly-shared words.</p>
Tempo	<p>People who are not used to hearing a different language or an unfamiliar accent will need extra time to pause and make the mental translation.</p>	<p>Pace your speech according to the likely needs of your audience. Allow about half again as much time to get your point across as you would for an audience that speaks your language as a native. Americans from the Northeast U.S. need to pay particular attention to slowing down their delivery.</p>
Schedules and timing	<p>Different cultures place different importance on punctuality and precision of timing</p>	<p>Understand the differences, and agree on standards and procedures to be followed as a team. Also agree on rationale for such standards, so that everyone buys into the reasoning. Be prepared to make trade-offs if you discover that differences are great. Be as specific as possible. Avoid phrases that can be construed differently (such as “as soon as possible”).</p>
Vacation time and personal time	<p>Many cultures hold their personal schedules as sacrosanct, while others regularly sacrifice personal time for company business. Many countries, particularly those of Europe, have generous vacation schedules compared to North America and Asia.</p>	<p>Establish a “world” calendar for the team that shows all national holidays and vacation periods for all representative countries. Never assume that it’s okay to schedule important meetings during these periods. Also never assume that dinner meetings or working weekends will be acceptable. It’s best to understand scheduling constraints from the beginning and work around them, rather than trying to change them.</p>
Level of detail	<p>Some cultures value details, facts, and historical context more than others. Some cultures prefer to emphasize the “big picture” and explore the underlying logic and principles.</p>	<p>Be aware of the differences among team members. As a team, agree on the level of detail each communiqué really needs, and why. Provide examples for each</p>

		that are shared and agreed to by the team. Make sure your business sponsors are comfortable with your examples, and adjust if necessary.
Decision-making process	Some cultures place great value on the speed of decision-making, while others place greater emphasis on the need to be more inclusive, even if it means a more protracted process	Clarify in advance who will have decision-making authority and what criteria will be used. Build in time for multiple approval process if needed, or agree to a decision-making process that balances cultural sensitivity and efficiency.
Formality	Even when all are working for a U.S.-based organization that tends toward informality, it's never safe to assume that informality will be accepted by all	<p>When first meeting other team members, ask each how he/she would like to be addressed. When in doubt, err on the side of formality unless told differently. Many of those who hail from "formal" cultures are fine being called by their first name when doing business in the U.S., but may chafe when being so addressed in their native country.</p> <p>Realize that some cultures are more formal or less formal in a variety of ways, from nonverbal communications such as smiling or shaking hands, to salutations, to manner of speech, to style of dress. Watch closely and do your best to emulate your guests when in their country. (Exception: If you tend to smile a lot, don't make yourself hold back. But do attempt to restrain any habits or styles that may be distracting, such as waving of hands or tendency to laugh frequently.)</p>
Expressing opinions	Some cultures tend to break in frequently to ask questions, pose challenges or disagree, while others prefer to maintain group harmony by never openly disagreeing. Some tend to allow others to speak before voicing their own opinion,	Take the time to probe individually (and gently) if you suspect that some members are holding back their opinions in open forums. Those who tend to interrupt when working within

	<p>while others speak <i>over</i> the conversations of others.</p>	<p>their own cultures should carefully consider the likely reaction of those from other cultures. Likewise, those who are not used to being interrupted should not necessarily take these interruptions to mean their ideas are unworthy or invalid. In some cultures, frequent challenges are a sign that someone is paying attention and cares deeply about what you have to say!</p>
<p>Achieving understanding</p>	<p>Many people, regardless of culture, are reluctant to admit they do not understand, especially when others seem to.</p>	<p>Continually test for comprehension. This can be done a number of ways. In a meeting, whether face to face or remote, pause and restate key points, speaking slowly. Indicate that you are aware that you may not be speaking in a way that many find understandable, and invite others to interrupt when they don't understand.</p> <p>When writing, you may preface memos or reports by asking others to help you understand which parts are confusing, and offer to do the same for them.</p> <p>If you can see the others, look for body language, facial expressions, attentiveness and other barometers that indicate whether you are getting your point across. What you may mistake for boredom may in fact be confusion.</p>

As we went along, we could see nods of agreement, many “A-ha!” expressions and lots of smiles. We even heard some laughs, especially when some team members heard themselves being described—not by name, certainly, but by habit and predisposition.

When we were finished reviewing the most frequently-cited challenges, we asked members if they would like to share their learnings. We were pleased that everyone chose to comment. Among the comments we heard:

- *“Now I understand why I get so many confused looks when I talk!”*
- *“I figured I was the only one who had something to say when I pose challenges”*
- *“I didn’t think I spoke that fast! I guess I do”*
- *“I assumed that because we’re a U.S.-based company that everyone was comfortable being as informal as we are. In retrospect, I think we were really being presumptuous”*
- *“I knew that many of us were reading the same e-mails different ways, but I had no idea how differently we have been interpreting the same language”*
- *“I won’t make fun of your summer vacation schedule again, but I can’t promise I won’t be envious”*
- *“As the project manager, I feel that I have not taken into account many of these aspects, like level of detail and approval process, when creating the project plan. I will need everyone’s help to rethink our current plan and then make any changes that are important to all of us.”*
- *“I’m glad everyone realizes that just because I speak out loud during meetings, it doesn’t mean I don’t have a lot to say”*

We ended the session by encouraging the team to use the next two weeks between now and our final cross-cultural communications session to learn from each other and be as open as they felt comfortable in letting others know when they did not understand or agree—and why.

Once again, we asked members to contact us with additional questions or problems, which we could include in our final session. We concluded with a favorite quote from Descartes:

“It is useful to know something about another nation’s habits in order to judge our own in a healthier fashion, and not to imagine everything which differs from ours should be dismissed as ridiculous or illogical, as is frequently done by those who haven’t seen anything.”