

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

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*This piece is the third 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:**

*GenCo has launched a major ERP initiative, which can make or break the company over the next five years. The project team, consisting members from GenCo offices around the world, needs to better understand their cultural differences to collaborate effectively.*

*In part two of this three-part series we explored specific difficulties team members had encountered in working together and suggested possible remedies. In this third and final article, we provide some tips for team members and managers alike, to help ensure that they work as a unified team over the life of the project.*

After reflecting on the feedback we had received from our second cross-cultural communications training session, we realized that there were a number of lessons that all team members could benefit from. For our third videoconferenced training session, we presented some overall comments, observations and advice that we believed would help foster an empathy and understanding for the cultural differences they were experiencing—many for the first time.

Here is a paraphrasing of our final “lesson.” For our lesson, we chose words that would be understandable to non-native English speakers. For this publication, we have phrased our lesson for a native English-speaking audience.

### **Making the “right” choice**

- Many of you have asked us for the “right” solution. There really is no “right” or “wrong” answer as to how to behave in any given situation. Even given the identical set of circumstances, the answer that’s best for me may not be the most appropriate for you. What’s most important is that we are sensitive enough to each other’s cultures to predict how words or actions are *likely* to be received. When we make choices about how best to communicate in any given situation, we must take into account the needs and preferences of *everyone*. What’s likely to appeal to one culture may turn off another. Sometimes the deciding question has to be quite simply: What is the culture of the most important person in the audience, and what would they most prefer?
- Making choices about how to tune our communications to other audiences is *not* really about making compromises or sacrificing our integrity. It *is* about thinking through what we most want or need to convey and making a best guess about how our audience might like best to receive it. Think of cross-cultural communications with you walking across a bridge and

another person coming toward you from the other side. If you keep walking, eventually you will meet. The question to ask is: How do we meet as close as possible to halfway?

## **Stereotypes**

- Like it or not, we all hold stereotypes of other cultures, religions, occupations and so on. There are times when stereotypes can help and times when they can hurt. Stereotypes help us when they reduce complex realities into manageable dimensions; they are consciously held and subject to change; and when they represent an accurate depiction of the norm. For example, chances are I will be much more successful in my first negotiation session in Spain if I make certain assumptions about the Spanish that are different from, for example, assumptions I might make about negotiating with Koreans.
- Stereotypes are harmful when we refuse to let go of them, despite evidence to the contrary; when they are evaluative vs. descriptive; or when they are based on misconceived notions. For example, if I learn certain aspects of the Spanish culture that are quite different than others I am familiar with, I need to file these differences away as “data points” and refrain from judgment. Just as important, when I develop a relationship with my colleagues in Spain, I need to see beyond the stereotypes and treat each person as individual who represents an exception to “rule.”
- Successful communications depend as much on our understanding of another culture as on our understanding of how *we* are likely to be perceived.

## ***Putting everything in the right context***

- People from certain cultures (e.g. French, Japanese, Mediterranean, Latin American) are regarded as “high context.” This means that these people typically receive their most valuable information from the context that *surrounds* words, rather than focusing on the words themselves. They tend to use words sparingly, relying more on context and tone. Important information is conveyed and received implicitly. (“It goes without saying...”)
- People from “low context” cultures (e.g. American, German, Northern European) like things spelled out. For them, the most valuable information is embedded in words and details. These people tend not to be satisfied with a “broad brush view.” Instead, they look for explicit information to provide the most important meaning. They tend to hold information close to the vest and parcel it out only when they are convinced someone *needs* to know it. Low context cultures tend to be considerably more formal than their high-context counterparts.
- Thinking about the members of this project team, consider the needs each of you has in terms of how you give and receive information. No wonder some of you have been complaining about “too many details” and others have been criticized for not providing *enough!* As a team, agree on the level of detail needed for each of your most frequent forms of communication, along with the rationale.

### *Timing is everything*

- “Monochronic” cultures like to take one thing at a time. They tend to compartmentalize and schedule time precisely. Following procedures and keeping order sometimes becomes more important than achieving a desired outcome. Punctuality can be sacred and interruptions to the logical flow are unwelcome. German, Austrian, Swiss, American, and Northern European cultures are examples.
- “Polychronic” cultures cope very well with many activities going on simultaneously; in fact, many *prefer* to have several balls in the air at once. They see interruptions as a natural and necessary part of doing business. Human interactions override schedules. The intended outcome is more important than the rules used to achieve it. Latin Americans, French, Southern European and Chinese are examples.
- Consider how you operate as a team. Some of you may be annoyed when asked to suddenly switch gears. Others feel more effective when you are working on several tasks as once. Before you pick up that phone or send that e-mail asking the others to stop what they’re doing, decide how necessary this interruption *really* is. Or consider asking just a few to work on this new activity.

### *Communication styles and preferences*

- There are at least as many communication styles and preferences as there are cultures. (And within each national culture, there are many regional styles.) For example, Americans and Brits like to use humor frequently. Germans tend to convey thoughts in a direct, pointed and sometimes blunt manner, while French and Italians, tend to engage in elaborate repartee to get their messages across.
- Take the time to learn about the communication styles and preferences of all national cultures on the team. This can be done a number of ways: Ask them or others you may know from the same culture; watch and listen with heightened sensitivity; or seek out films or read historical novels (both of which often convey more meaning than any textbook).
- With this knowledge, think about the situations where your respective styles are most likely to clash. Create presentations, memos, reports, meeting agendas and the like with these differences in mind, trying to avoid the most obvious problem areas.

### *The use of “Overseas” English*

- We briefly reviewed this in our last session, but believes it bears repeating: Even though it’s true the international language of business is English, be aware that a direct translation to or from another language is likely to cause confusion. For example, the French word for “ask” is close to the English “demand.” A French person may be “asking,” but an English speaker may be put off by a “demand.” The word “get” is a nightmare in overseas English. It means everything and nothing in Standard English. Because it is so imprecise, can be construed in multiple ways when translated into another language.

- For those of you who speak English as your native language, choose words that are likely to have the intended meaning when translated. How will you know? The best way is to ask a non-native English speaker beforehand, especially when your communiqué is an important one. (There are also several excellent books available that cover the use of “Overseas English.”)
- For those of you who are not native English speakers, let others know when their communications are unclear and why. Explain how *you* heard the word or phrase. You can actually have some fun with this by highlighting the “Top 10” words or phrases that caused the most confusion in any given period, and award a “prize” (or collect a “fine”) from the most frequent contributor to the list. This way, everyone shares and learns at the same time.

### ***Management hierarchy***

- The importance of maintaining a formal hierarchy can depend as much on the culture on the company or the industry type as on the national culture. U.S. companies tend to have more casual corporate cultures than their counterparts. In most other countries, the hierarchical structure dictates how communication flows. Some will insist on passing ideas and plans through a more formal process than the project has time for.
- Agree on a review process that honors the needs of all members, balanced against the need to meet certain project milestones. You may need to challenge assumptions each of you makes about who is really critical to review each phase. Worst case, you may need to extend the project deadline, in which case some of the reviewers may choose to take themselves out of the review loop.

### ***Decision-making styles***

- In most Asian cultures, group consensus must be achieved before decisions can be made. In the U.S., on the other hand, decisions are made quickly and are often based on pointed facts and emotional appeal. In France, making decisions may take a long time, with extensive dialogue regarding underlying philosophies, overall framework and long-term approach.
- Team members should develop decision-making criteria together and publish this to all stakeholders. Agree upon who truly needs to be involved and how long the process will realistically take. You may need to make a trade-off between time spent in making decisions up front, vs. time spent reworking the decision later if important decision-makers are excluded.

### ***Feedback***

- Different cultures place different levels of importance on feedback. Americans, for example, tend to expect continuous feedback, informal and formal, both positive and negative. We prefer criticism to come sugarcoated; we like to be stroked before being criticized. People from most other cultures, on the other hand, generally expect to hear from their manager only when there is a problem. They may become confused when criticism is preceded by positive comments.

- As a team, discuss how frequently and in what form feedback will be most important from each other, and from IT management and business sponsors. Also agree on the areas where feedback will be most valuable to the success of the project and to each of you individually. It is quite possible that some of you may want to know only when you are not living up to expectations, and others may want positive affirmation as well as constructive criticism.

### ***Motivation and rewards***

- What motivates an individual or team in one culture may not be inspiring to those of a different culture. Americans may be motivated by the prospect of a higher salary or bonus, or a larger group to manage. Asians, on the other hand, may be more motivated by the vision of a more prosperous company or a more harmonious organization. An Arab may be more motivated by an enhanced reputation within the community, religious body, or extended family.
- Spend some time sharing with each other and with your management, what each of you finds motivating *personally* and as a team. You might consider creating two reward systems: one that team members can use themselves. For example, when someone goes above and beyond the call of duty in helping out another member, that person may be awarded a special meal or a small gift certificate.
- IT management should also create a reward system for achieving or exceeding agreed-upon goals as a team. For example, if the team meets a major deliverable by a certain date, the team is treated to a celebratory lunch or dinner. Or if the business sponsors indicate a particularly high level of customer satisfaction with the team's progress, the team is invited to a special breakfast session with an executive vice president.

### ***Our final advice for the team***

All of you have an incredibly exciting opportunity to be part of a truly global team. You will find yourself challenged—emotionally, intellectually and professionally—in ways you may never have imagined. With these challenges come unsurpassed opportunities for skill building, growth and learning. As more companies discover they must be part of a global network to survive in the future, the skills and experience you will be accumulating during this project will make you even more marketable than you are today.

You will continue to experience some level of frustration and confusion as you go forward together. But as you become proficient in working well together, you will experience the kind of joy that comes with deep personal gratification and professional accomplishment.

The best advice we can give you in parting is this: Constantly validate assumptions you may be making. Listen generously and without judgment. Observe carefully. Use every conversation, every e-mail, every meeting, every presentation as an opportunity to learn something about the other cultures, your own culture, and yourself. You will likely look back on this project as one of your most meaningful, memorable and successful projects you have ever been part of.