

Cultivating your Communications in an International Project Team

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In mid-2010, we wrote an article about project communications which focused on the challenges and techniques of communicating in a virtual team. We gave some examples of when to use different communications mediums to suit the task at hand. In this follow-up communications piece, we talk about some of the nuances of working in an international project team, and in particular, some things to bear in mind when you communicate with, and present to people from cultures different from your own.

Examples of communication factors

Our efforts to communicate, either one-on-one or in a group, are influenced by many factors, well documented in various studies, research papers and the general media.

To give just a few examples of how we communicate with others, consider the following factors that can impact your communication when you send and receive a message:

- Is the objective of the communication regular/general or important/critical?
- What impact does your personality have both in terms of your own perception of its impact, and the actual impact on the other person or people?
- What impact do you think your mood or physical condition at that specific time has on how you deliver your message?
- Does your own culture have a significant impact on communication?

Of the factors mentioned above, studies have shown that culture plays a big part. Culture can be generational, geographical, organisational, or a combination of these. For example:

- your culture has a large impact on the way that you project your message, whatever the chosen format, and
- the culture and norms of the people with whom you are communicating, whether they are in a group or on their own, in addition to factors such as their personality and mood, can have a significant effect on how they interpret your message.

A few thoughts on the impact of different cultures in project teams

Project communications take place through many different mediums, and the old maxim of “communication being 90% of a Project Manager’s job” is probably true. Many projects are international in their team composition (whether many nationalities co-located or far-flung across the world working remotely with each other); indeed, this was true in the past and is equally true today.

Our brains typically filter and distort communications into “our perceptions.” What you “think” you have communicated might not be what the recipients received as the message. This is true regardless of culture, but it is certainly pertinent when you are communicating with someone from a different culture. So be certain that what you believe you communicated is what the recipient(s) of that message understood. A way to achieve this is to ask people to rephrase what you have just described to them, or ask for questions and feedback.

1. Check your general understanding of their interpretation.

If you are currently working on a project with team members from several different nations, or when you are next working in such a team, take a moment to consider the effect of culture on the perceptions of those with whom you communicate. Would discussing this issue be of value?

2. Review your style of face to face communication with people from different cultures

When we are communicating with an individual or a group, studies have indicated that less than a tenth of a message is conveyed verbally. Most of the message is being perceived by the recipient(s) through the tone and pitch of your voice and – in particular – your body language.

If you are presenting to a group of people from a different culture, take the time beforehand to learn how people from that culture typically like to receive a message or presentation, e.g., do they like structure or do they prefer a random story? Do they like imagery or detail? One of us recently experienced a good example of this when making a presentation to an audience of a different culture; he discussed the preferences with the Host to gain knowledge of what typically works well, and adapted his style to suit.

3. Consider cultural norms of those with whom you communicate.

Learn about the cultural norms of those with whom you will be working. For example, is direct confrontation in a meeting expected/welcome? Perhaps you should take the time to understand any of their national “hot topics.”

We hope this short article has spurred you to reflect on your communications when you work in an international project team. There are many different aspects to consider. We would really like to hear from you if you have an interesting story to tell. If so, please email us at Contactus@pmoracles.com – and be sure to communicate it to us clearly so that we interpret your message as you intend us to!