

Keys to successful international teamwork

Cooperation and communication in intercultural projects

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1 Executive summary

After explaining the challenges faced by project managers working in an international context, this paper lists the skills required to be successful and to take advantage of the cultural diversity. It gives some guidelines to develop the intercultural competence at the individual level and to foster trust within the team by implementing communication principles.

Finally it describes an experiential learning method, called "Applied Improvisation" which allows the development of the skills required in international projects. An example of its application at a German IT Consulting firm, shows how the participants of an Applied Improvisation workshop developed their communication and leadership skills, learned to cooperate with one another in a playful and nevertheless effective way.

2 More and more projects are international

People, goods, services, ideas and knowledge have been crossing borders for a long time. Yet the expansion of technologies such as IT-Telecommunications and transportation has greatly increased the rate of mobility and exchange in the recent past.

In today's business world, you can no longer operate as if you were on your own on a remote island.

And this is inevitably reflected in projects. Today the following projects' configurations are very common:

- A project team from a country working for a customer of another country,
- Two teams from two different countries working together on a project,
- Team members from different countries working on an international project in the same location
- Team members and stakeholders located in several worldwide locations,
- Etc.

3 Challenges of international projects

3.1 Languages

The first obvious challenge in an international project is the language. Intercultural teams are facing two concerns:

- Which language to choose? It is often assumed that English will be the language for communication during the project, without addressing the topic. Native speakers always working in their native language can be unaware of the troubles encountered by non-natives speakers who have to translate their documents and work in a foreign language.
- Whatever the language chosen, there will be native speakers and non-natives speakers with different levels of command of the language, and this can lead to misunderstanding.

3.2 Cultures

People from different cultures exhibit different values, different ways of working, and different communication styles without even being aware of them, sometimes. In a project, this will translate into differences in expectations from each stakeholder; each team member and can be source of misunderstandings and conflicts.

3.3 Locations

Often international projects are set in a context with people working in different locations. This implies more remote communication via emails, phone or video-web conferences, than face-to-face communication and this can impede the building of trust between the people involved.

4 Benefits of international projects

International projects are more complex and unavoidable; on the other hand they bring lots of new opportunities. Indeed when the challenges are well managed, these can become real advantages. For example, the richness of diversity allows one to find new solutions that would not have been apparent from only one point of view.

5 What can a project manager do?

Working in an international context is more challenging for a project manager. Along with the traditional project management functions and tasks, s/he must integrate the cross-cultural component, following these steps:

1. Raising consciousness about one's own values, beliefs, way of thinking, etc. ,

2. Developing awareness of the differences to others' values, beliefs, thinking,
3. Being able to see from the other's perspective: this means communicating openly with others, without judgment,
4. Accepting that there is no right or wrong approach, that there is more than one "truth"; this is when change really happens,
5. Being able to build a common picture which values everybody's input.

In other words, a project manager should strive to:

- Develop his/her own intercultural competence
- Develop intercultural awareness within the team
- Strengthen communication rules that build trust

5.1 Developing own intercultural competence

To be successful in an intercultural environment a project manager should develop strong personal and interpersonal skills. Some of the essential skills for project management are especially required, such as:

- Strategic leadership,
- Active listening skills,
- Non verbal communication skills,
- Emotional intelligence (Self-awareness, self-control and empathy).
- Influencing skills

To develop the intercultural competence, one can focus on growing further:

- Openness, tolerant attitude, respect of others' values,
- Knowledge about other cultures,
- Adaptability, ability to deal with uncertainty.

The important part of getting knowledge about other cultures is to understand how cultural dimensions impact communication and cooperation. For example: people used to an authoritarian and paternalistic management style react differently than people used to a consultative and democratic one. Identifying the differences in ways to address hierarchy and power will help to understand and align with stakeholders and team members in order to reach realistic expectations for actions and deliverables.

To develop knowledge about other cultures, one should learn about cultural dimensions [1] and then learn specific information about the culture of the countries involved in the project. This information is abundant in books, on Internet or e-learning, and there is a broad training offering.

Only practice in combination with all the other skills will deepen the learning. Workshops are an efficient way to get the impulse and coaching sessions are useful to support the skills development.

5.2 Developing intercultural awareness within the team

While it is not always possible to develop intercultural awareness with stakeholders, it is essential to develop it within the team. Ideally, all team members would get intercultural awareness training. Unfortunately constraints such as time and budget often prevent this to happen.

As a project manager there are still some actions that you can take to make your project succeed:

- Be a role model
- Be trustworthy
- Develop norms and processes that encourage interaction
- Acknowledge differences in communication styles (Verbal and non verbal).
- Address emotions
- Find a common ground
- Encourage understanding of other's perspectives
- Implement indicators to measure trust, closeness of teamwork, emotion intelligence management, use of constructive communication techniques.
- Be patient.
- Encourage all team members to balance relationships development with task completion. Both are needed.

5.3 Strengthening communication rules that build trust

Agreeing on ground rules for communication will greatly help to development of trust within the team and improve the performance. As a project manager you should make sure that you have principles, instead of consolidate procedures, on:

- How to communicate: Email rules can be very different country to country regarding the respect of hierarchical levels, who to include in copy,...
- How to make decisions
- How to communication decisions.
- How to manage conflicts.

For example, defining with the team a guideline such as "What to do when you don't get what you expected from another team member" will create the opportunity to address communication principles, and set some behaviors that will serve the building of trust within the team. Cultural concerns can be expressed, such as "(how) should we convey feelings?"

A result could be the following guideline:

- *Not taking it personally*
- *Contacting the person directly and privately (in face to face or by phone)*
- *Stating the facts without interpretation (Ex: I didn't receive an answer to my email)*
- *Explaining the effect on you and your work (Ex: I am missing an important information, I couldn't answer the customer and I get upset)*

- *Listening to the other's point of view (Ex: He didn't know what was the information for and had other priorities)*
- *Finding an agreement (Ex: next time I need an important information, I will call instead of emailing or I will mention why this information is important for me/my work/the project)*

6 Developing intercultural project management skills with Applied Improvisation

6.1 Applied Improvisation

Improvisation Theatre (aka Impro) is the art of acting without script or props: making everything up on the spot, in real time, following a set of guidelines and practices. When embedded in an experiential learning activity adapted to a business environment, the method is called Applied Improvisation, or Business improvisation or Improvisation in Management.

The world's top business schools— including those at Duke University [2] and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) [3] – are using aspects of Improvisation Theatre in their programs, in which (future) managers are placed in challenging situations and trained in *spontaneous reaction techniques* - or simply, 'improvisation'.

This method is expanding worldwide and is based on a few principles, such as:

- Be present. Pay attention. Watch, Listen. Be aware of what is going on within you and outside.
- “Yes, and...” Face the facts, take everything you are given as offers, acknowledge other's ideas and build on what is existing. Act now.
- Make your partner(s) look good. Take care of each other. Benevolence.
- Enjoy. Don't judge. Take appropriate risks, mistakes are allowed

When individuals learn these principles and apply them at work, they will develop the competencies needed to be successful in today's changing world. They will be able to expect the unexpected, to see other's perspectives and adapt to change.

The competencies that are developed while enjoying Improvisation Theatre exercises are useful competencies such as creativity, confidence, effective listening skills, interpersonal communication, cooperation, emotional intelligence, risk taking, and more.

And all skills developed for Improvisation Theatre are transferable to business, both at individual and team levels.

Applied Improvisation is an effective way to develop the personal and interpersonal skills required for successfully leading and/or working in an international project!

6.2 The “Yes, and...” principle

This is one of the basic rules in Improvisation. “Yes” means acknowledging what is there: whether that is an offer from a teammate or any unexpected element; “and” means building on that element, using it as a resource and adding something to it.

This guideline is the basis of effective cooperation. It allows team members to find a solution that no one would have thought of if working alone.

It requires everyone to listen to the others and be aware of his surroundings.

It fosters creativity by releasing participants from the expectation (and pressure) to generate something new.

It stimulates action by encouraging everyone to go a step further than he otherwise might have gone.

6.3 Case Study : Improving team cooperation with Improvisation Theater techniques at SPE Unternehmensberatung GmbH [4]

As part of its trainee program SPE Unternehmensberatung GmbH in Mannheim organized an Applied Improvisation team event to increase cooperation within the team of international trainees.

One of the trainees was quite skeptical at the beginning: “When I first understood that it would be an Improvisation Theater workshop, I asked myself if this was supposed to be a joke. What on earth could Improvisation possibly have to do with my work or with team building?!”

The workshop started with some warm-up exercises. The purpose of the warm-up was to create a safe environment in which participants can take appropriate risks. Then the group performed learning activities to develop trust and cooperation. Thanks to the warm-up, participants felt comfortable to leave their comfort zone and try new things. After an activity in which participants learned to share leadership with their partners, another exercise helped them to show sides of themselves they usually hide at work. Activities that encourage the expression of emotions were much appreciated.

Finally, the participants could apply everything they had just learned through acting out short sketches.

The flow of the workshop was designed to gradually build confidence and trust that helps to overcome the fear of being in the spotlight, so by this point everyone felt comfortable to act in front of the others. Played in small groups, the sketches contributed to developing teamwork.

During the debriefing following each activity, participants analyzed what happened and related their findings to their project work: how one person's mood can influence that of the others, or how to let others lead, or how important trust is in a team.

This group also surprised themselves: by how willingly they took part in the challenging activities and reached beyond their own limits, and how quickly they discovered the

positive in their teammates, when those persons were showing a new side of themselves.

During the activities, participants get to know their teammates in a completely different light than when working together on a project. This new view creates more trust, which is fundamental to effective communication and cooperation.

At the end of the workshop attendees were confident that they would work together better, that they would be more attentive to each other, and that they would listen more actively to each other and have more empathy. They also concluded that Applied Improvisation was indeed relevant to their work!

7 About the author

After attaining her degree in Computing Sciences in Paris, Frederique Thiriet-Smith has worked in multinational companies for over 25 years, as project manager and education specialist, successfully leading multicultural teams with various reporting structures. What drives Frederique is a love of facilitating change and improving corporate communication while focusing on the human aspects of business.

She is a French national who has lived in Heidelberg, Germany since 1999.

Some years ago, she started to play Improvisation Theatre, which she now uses along with other playful activities as a tool for intercultural awareness, personal development, leadership, change management, team building, creativity, and communication skills development. She is convinced that Applied Improvisation brings a new dimension to business, combining “fun” and “learning” in an effective way.

As freelance Consultant-Trainer she promotes the use of experiential learning techniques at international companies and universities to improve international cooperation and develop competencies that will make them successful in an international context.

8 Bibliography

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[3] MIT Sloan School of Management , *Dynamic Leadership: Using Improvisation in Business*

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