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Virtual Cooperation within Intercultural Project Teams

Walter Sumetzberger

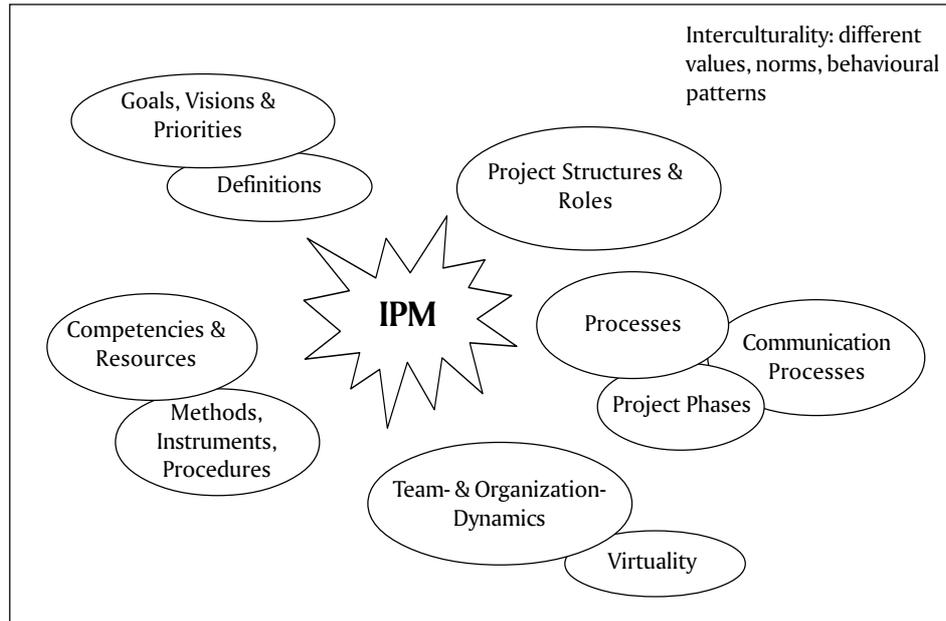
When project management already poses a sufficient challenge in its own right, multinational settings bring additional complications into the equation. The challenges relating to two aspects of projects within multinational settings – cultural differences and virtuality – will be examined more closely in this article. Approaches for solutions will be demonstrated for typical communication pitfalls within project teams working on a virtual level.

Projects as Social Systems

In order to meet new challengingly complex problems, which can only be dealt with in an interdisciplinary way, the employment of projects means that an individual social system is built up with every project that is initiated – this social system must differ sufficiently from those already in existence (e.g. from the normal hierarchic composition of a company).

Projects as social systems – and international projects in particular – reveal the following elements, which are also important organizational fields for the project management.

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In the following two aspects which are characteristics for international projects, should be singled out:

- Working within teams of intercultural members
- The virtuality of team work.

Challenges for the Management of International Projects

The project complexity increases exponentially within intercultural/international projects. Cultural differences relating to values, norms and behavioural patterns are especially relevant within international projects. Each international project is faced with the challenge of developing its own project culture.

The first activity of a project is project planning, which is therefore formative for the project's culture. The use of special instruments and tools has become accepted for the project planning process. These project management tools have cultural characteristics (US-American planning tools and systematic expansion, for example) and are used according to the culture.

In projects with international, intercultural teams, the question is raised as to which culturally specific responses are to be expected upon the use of project

management instruments, and which culturally appropriate reactions, respectively, which approach with the instruments is possible?

Which aspects, for example from project managers, as well as from external parties (consultants, facilitators), are to be observed and taken into consideration

- before the project begins
- whilst the project is in process?

Culturally Sensitive Aspects of the Planning Instruments

Taking the objective project demarcation as an example (problem diagnosis, target clarification, task definition), the following questions can arise against different cultural backgrounds:

- To what extent is it possible and admissible to discuss problems?

For example, in some Eastern European countries (with the exception of Russia), communication takes place in a rather indirect way, problems are more likely not to be discussed or, respectively, not straightaway

- A difference can also be the problem diagnosis orientation (e.g. more likely in Germany) versus the target orientation (e.g. more likely in the USA) of project members. In a planning process, the question is quickly raised as to how much time has been put into a problem diagnosis and how elaborately the initial situation is described.
- Differences can exist in the purpose/value/relevance/commitment of targets. The spectrum can range from “Why set targets – things anyway go differently than planned and are hard to influence” through to “SMART goals: precise, explicit, ambitious target formulation”. Targets can be seen as preliminary, to set the orientation, to show the direction and to be adapted as necessary.
- Target formulation can be understood as an aid to precisely conceptualize and meet demands, or can be experienced as restrictive and obstructive in carrying out the accustomed style of improvisation. Planning is then experienced as a devaluation of that which evolves naturally.

- Commitment to targets also lessens within certain cultural contexts when socially relevant events make another course of action necessary (e.g. reports from a colleague concerning a project in Ethiopia, which came to a standstill for several weeks when the project leader's distant uncle died).

Different cultural backgrounds also allow different planning patterns to emerge, e.g.:

- Conclusions are drawn from the past for projects in the planning.
- Or the starting point is the 'here and now' and what possibilities this allows.
- Or long-term strategic targets/visions are the leitmotif upon which the planning is oriented.

Furthermore, there can be differences in the level of the detail/precision in the planning.

There can also be important differences in the timing aspect of the planning:

- How the last-minute/long-term planning is carried out, what are the appropriate rhythms of a rolling planning?
- A monochrome time response, respectively, a linear way of thinking with concentration on one matter ("one thing after the other") or polychrome time response, respectively, circular way of thinking with "multi-tasking" can influence the chronology of the conceptual formulation.

Virtual Cooperation within Intercultural Teams

Individuals from different cultural backgrounds should work together within international project teams. Few people are aware how our own culture influences the way we think and react. We have a tendency to take our own values, norms and our resulting actions as universally acceptable. This becomes difficult when several cultures work together.

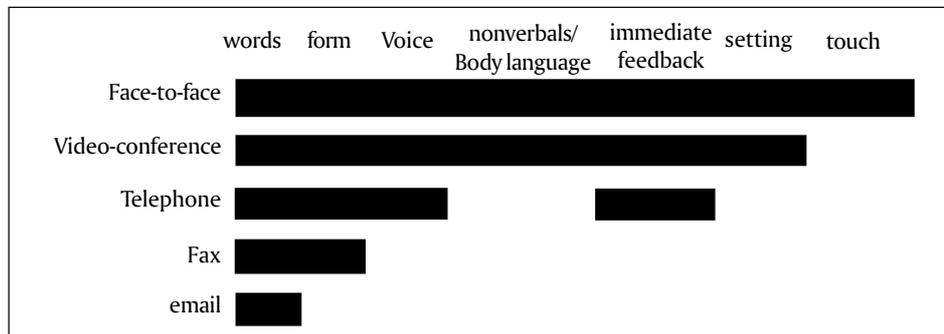
In addition to this, project teams often work as virtual teams. What are the characteristics of virtual teams:

- The team members are spread across different geographic locations and belong to different parts of an organization, or to different organizations
- The team members hardly meet face-to-face

- The main form of communication takes place via new electronic media.

The communication and cooperation via new media adds a further complication to effective teamwork, in addition to the intercultural hurdles.

By means of modern virtual work forms, which are made possible by the Internet and video conferences, large amounts of information can be made rapidly and widely available, as well as quickly bridging great distances. But at the same time, these forms of communication also keep on producing misunderstandings, offense and conflicts. Therefore, within the framework of international cooperation, one should always bear in mind that the media utilized can work on the most diverse levels:



Particularly those media that are frequently used within virtual teams are weak in varied and diverse forms of communication and thereby weak in trust-building communication possibilities.

Key Questions

Key questions for intercultural project teams working on a virtual level are:

- What is the group notion concerning what a team in a bi-, respectively, multicultural context represents?
- What are the team members' similarities and differences?
- And how do they influence the teamwork?
- How can we use the cultural differences within our team for synergy effects?
- Which media are suitable for processing the themes/contents of differing levels of complexity?

Communication Pitfalls

The following describes several selected examples that, in our experience, represent the typical pitfalls of intercultural teams working on a virtual level:

Messages Mean Different Things to Different People

Messages are interpreted in different ways. Team members often don't double check to see if they have been understood correctly (e.g. "we should solve that quickly" can mean "stop everything else" or "within the next few weeks").

Cultural norms often form the foundation for further misunderstandings. For example, in a telephone conference, Israelis tend to speak in a forthright manner when they have got something to say. Indians wait until they are invited to say something. This can lead to Indians seeing the Israelis as aggressive, whilst the Israelis consider the Indians to be passive.

In the virtual cooperation between German and US-American employees, there were repeated misunderstandings and discord because messages which were understood in a German context as "normal" came across to the Americans as direct, rude, brash, insensitive and authoritarian. German employees, on the other hand, found the American style of correspondence as weighed down with too much "annoying small talk".

There are also often different expectations in the "response time" and the extent of replies.

Many communication problems aren't seen as "misunderstandings". They are often all too quickly seen as manipulative, unwilling or malicious behaviour - it is then difficult to find counter examples. This increases distrust with the team.

Not All Team Members Communicate in their Native Language

Consideration should also be given to the fact that not all team members communicate in their native language. It is therefore necessary to be generous with the interpretation of words and not to immediately imagine the worst. Often it is a simple lack of knowledge or insecurity if a formulation appears to be impolite. A leap of faith is one of the most important elements of teamwork.

In addition to this, terms have different meanings:

For example, in Germany the term “konzept” cannot be literally translated by the English term “concept”. In Germany, this is understood to mean a polished composition, whilst in English it refers more to an idea that has just been expressed.

When this term is used within an American-German team, it can generate different expectations and can result in bitter disappointments.

Visibility of the Team Members

The individual team members are scarcely visible. It is hard to understand what they are doing, what their motivations are, what frame of mind they currently have... Team members also suddenly “disappear” from the scene. There are no answers, nobody knows what’s wrong. This provokes uncertainty within the team’s concerning the commitment of the others.

Among separated teams, the relationship to those working in the same place often becomes stronger whilst the contact to those distant colleagues is neglected. This uneven distribution of attention can lead to rivalries and discord.

Working at a Relationship is (variably) Important

There are different expectations from team members with different cultural backgrounds with regards to attention and feedback.

Special e-mail communication has a tendency to be strongly task oriented and less personal. Less importance is placed on individual contributions or positive feedbacks and these are not as powerful as in face-to-face meetings.

Differences of opinions, but also differences in expectations or basic assumptions are expressed less frequently, “placed on the table” and dealt with than in face-to-face situations. Therefore, these differences remain covered up for a long time and then sometimes explode “without any apparent reason”:

In eastern cultures, deliberately working at a relationship takes priority in the personal teamwork, whilst in other cultures (such as Germany) it is given secondary importance and only referred to as “nice-to-have”. Enormous problems of understanding can arise from these different priorities.

Working at a relationship and thereby the building up of trust and support should be integrated at the start of the teamwork into a permanent component in the daily work.

Clear Team Identity and Visibility of the Project

It is difficult and takes up more time to find answers to questions such as

- Who are we as a team?
- What is our goal, purpose?
- How should we work together?

Virtual teams hardly ever reach this cohesion in the way that face-to-face teams do. The result is often less commitment.

A virtual project, as such, is also hardly visible. The symbolism and rituals, with which the project can normally be made tangible, are very much reduced in virtual projects. The team members have a tendency to lose sight of the project as a whole. There are great uncertainties as to how their contribution can fit into the “big picture”. This also leads to reduced commitment.

The Applied Media is not Suited to the Complexity of the Communicated Contents

Only in direct face-to-face discussions can we use all the information sources that can facilitate communication: words, style, voices and inflections, body language, the direct feedback, the setting and the possibility to move others. All other forms of communication appear curtailed in one way or another. We therefore communicate by means of emails in an extremely abbreviated way with words alone; via fax and letters, the style takes place alongside the words; in telephoning, voices and the possibility of direct feedback is added; within the framework of a video conference, one can ultimately evaluate the body language of his/her counterpart.

In the consulting situation, we frequently experience that complex themes and contents are not processed via a communication form of equal complexity. In other words: conflict resolution via email is generally doomed to failure or escalates further still. “Simplifying” complex situations by means of complication-reducing communication generally leads to increased complications.

What is to be done?

More orientation at the start

Dispersed intercultural teams working on a virtual level need a clear structure – especially at the start of their teamwork – in order to be able to use their time and energy effectively despite the distance:

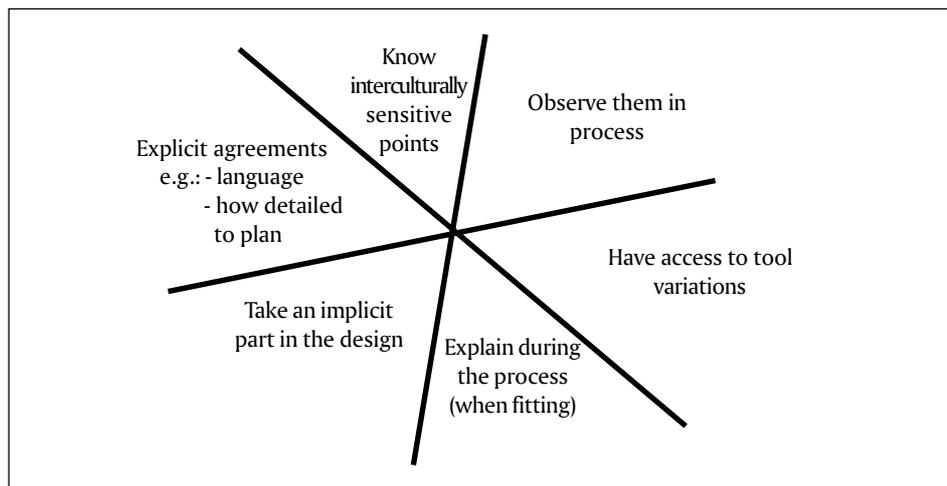
- Visions
- Targets
- Concrete tasks
- Roles.

The problem is that these issues can be understood differently against the respective cultural backgrounds (e.g. what is a viable target, exact planning, dealing with time,...) and this means that clarity and orientation cannot be established “at the drop of a hat” at the first meeting.

Experience shows that, even when one believes that targets have been clearly defined and laid down, it takes many stages to reach a mutual understanding.

Bring Interculturally Sensitive Aspects into the Equation

Culturally sensitive aspects can be taken into account in the following way:



The fundamental point is the promotion of an atmosphere of open communication within the team. It is essential that emphasis is repeatedly placed on the fact that – especially within an intercultural team – it is both normal and permitted to question anything that is unclear and to address (suspected) misunderstandings.

Furthermore, it would appear to be important for intercultural project teams to guide and give team members the confidence to address culturally specific questions and themes, and to sharpen the awareness of the cultural differences within the project team. This is by all means a difficult undertaking, as cultural themes greatly affect an individual's identity. Within teams, this is generally only then possible if a certain basis of trust in each other has been established and the use of reflection and feedback has been built up.

“Lessons Learned” sessions held at intervals during the project can prepare a framework in which ambiguities, irritations, misunderstandings and dissatisfactions can be addressed. Generally, these will primarily be problems (or rather addressed as such) which arise from the dynamics of the project work or virtual teamwork. According to experience, only in time will it be possible to work on cultural aspects of these problems and to pick these out as a theme.

Adequately complex communication forms

The communication possibilities must reproduce the complexity of the task of working within a virtual intercultural team. Different communication channels and processing forms are to be established:

- Face-to-face-meetings of all team members
- Video conference
- Telephone conference
- Telephone calls
- Chatroom
- e-mail
- Fax

- The entire team
- Regional or task-related sub-groups
- Bilateral contacts.

It can be helpful to differentiate between process and product media:

- “Process media” for the leading of an own (team) organization such as e.g. agreement of goals, clarification of roles,...
- “Product media”, deliver and document results such as new products, decisions, reports and plans. Process media are generally two-way media which enable interaction to take place (Telephone, video conference,...). Product media are rather one-way media, which communicate actions (letters, email, fax,...).

The basic principle for the selected media is: The more complex the contents, the more communication possibilities should be made available by the selected media.

Where does the responsibility for the obtaining of information lie?

A challenge in the use of electronic communications possibilities is often to manage the switch to personal responsibility for the obtaining of information (e.g. access to knowledge data bases).

The question of who is responsible for providing or collecting information is to be clarified, agreed, evaluated and continually adapted.

Media and Communications Plan

The media application forms the project process and is immensely effective for relationships. It is therefore a good investment to work out a media and communications plan in which the rules of the game are agreed.

A regular evaluation and adaptation of the media and communications plan is important as a result. In particular discussions are necessary, how media usage is understood on the relationship level. (“no return call on the same day = doesn't he take me seriously?”)

Provide Visibility to the Project and Team Members

The project leader must regularly provide the team members with an impression of how the entire project is moving forward. In so doing, it is important to describe and acknowledge the contribution of individual members.

To make the team members visible, it is important to provide information concerning the geographic location, time differences, absences due to business travel and holiday... (e.g. in a “directory of team members” available to everyone) to ensure that team members don’t “disappear”.

Success stories from virtual intercultural teams show that there's no way to avoid a face-to-face kick-off workshop, and that regular face-to-face meetings are essential for the support and maintenance of the social system.

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