TALES FROM THE FRONT

CROSSING BORDERS

BY **JAKE MALOOLEY**

As project practitioners increasingly helm projects far from home, they must adapt to other cultures' ways of communicating and working. Here, practitioners reflect on the culture clashes—and unexpected harmony—between their countries of origin and those where they work.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

William Passos, PMP, formerly lead vehicles program manager, PSA Peugeot Citroën, São Paulo, Brazil

I was an up-and-coming 28-year-old in 2008 when I left Brazil to manage a project in Buenos Aires, Argentina for the European auto manufacturer PSA Peugeot Citroën, my employer at the time. I was kind of afraid when I arrived. I was worried about how the local team would receive me. And I soon realized that I was dealing with people who had more years with the company than I had lived! This wouldn't have been an issue in Brazil, where higher-ups are routinely in their late 20s and 30s.

In Argentina, however, the corporate culture felt different. Workers are used to answering to managers who are in their 40s or pushing 50, and they didn't seem willing to accept a 20-something as a manager. At first I thought this was really weird, but then I put myself in their shoes: It can be hard to take direction from someone who's much younger.

Once I understood this, it was just a matter of gaining their trust in me. The one thing we all had in common as South Americans was our love of football. The first week I was there, we talked football and I'd joke with them about their team losing: "Oh, bad match last night, huh, guys?" I thought they were going to kill me! But it was part of our melding as a team. After a short period, my team members and I actually ended up playing football together quite a few times, and during the 2010 World Cup, I had the Argentinians over to my place to watch three matches. Suddenly, I was inside their community and they didn't see me so much as an outsider.

If you're working with ducks, be a duck. If you're working with birds, be a bird. By immersing myself in the local culture, I figured out how to touch my team and got them to do what I was asking in a fast and efficient way.

APPRECIAT ING DIFFERENCES

Shekhar Kelkar, PMP, project manager, Oasis Investment Co., Dubai, United Arab Emirates

I started my project management career in my native India with the knowledge that it doesn't take a trip across national borders to encounter cultural conflict; during my project management experience in India, I found there's a lot of conflict between people who are merely from different states. What I didn't fully grasp was how much these differences would transfer to the job.

Project team members in any place on the globe will have different thoughts about solving a particular problem, but that becomes a bigger issue when the people from different states speak different Indian languages. I learned to deal with these factions through team-building exercises so they did not hamper project objectives.

Since then, I've gotten into international projects and have been flown around from country to country. Most recently, I've been in Dubai close to two years now working on IT projects. When it comes to IT, Middle Easterners generally are not exposed to technology as early as Indians are. IT project work has become an ingrained part of modern Indian culture, which grooms workers in such a way that they study software engineering and they're immediately placed at a company via an on-campus interview and they jump directly into the IT field after graduation at the age of 21. Whereas people in the Middle East I've encountered are generally less experienced in a tech environment.

Coming to the Middle East from India, I've also noticed that, during Ramadan, the teams work fewer hours, and those observing the month of fasting don't eat or drink during the daytime. The other non-Muslims and I try to be as respectful as we can by not taking lunch in front of them.

In terms of common ground, the Middle Eastern project team members and I can really bond over cricket and films. They watch and are fascinated by Bollywood—so we can always talk movies.

TIMING THINGS RIGHT

Gordon Sanders, PMP,
Asia-Pacific global document
management solution project
manager, RSTN Consulting,
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

I was born and raised in Dallas, Texas, USA, but I currently live in Hong Kong and work in Vietnam as a contractor for RSTN Consulting, which is launching a global document management system for AIG in the firm's initiative to eliminate paper. One of the most notable changes I've found crossing international borders as a project manager is the differences in time scales. And as a project manager, it's part of your job to learn—and learn to work with and work around—the different temporal nuances of the cultures.

Whenever I worked in the United States, if I wanted something now, it would be there in a New York minute, which is less than a minute. Whereas in Vietnam, any time you have a meeting, you expect it to start 15 minutes late—all the meetings. In Hong Kong, people take two-hour lunches, but then they work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. to get the work done. Lunch in Vietnam, though, is exactly at noon, and because no one is in the office during that time, they turn off all the lights. It was a revelation to me because as a native of the United States, I go eat lunch when I'm hungry. I don't care what time it is. So one day I was sitting at my desk in Vietnam at noon, and all of a sudden the lights go off in the office! Then I realized, "Oh, it's lunch."

In Vietnam, team members prefer not to step outside the line of command to get something accomplished. If I need to get something done while working in the United States or Hong Kong, I just start contacting people until I can find the person I need to talk to so I can get it done—even if it means stepping outside of certain hierarchical channels. Southeast Asian

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workers are usually only willing to talk to their direct supervisor. So as a project manager, I have to realize that communication flows through a rigid set of channels.

Here's an interesting example: One of our new initiatives is to give the Vietnamese workers larger monitors, which are replacing the paper that they were using. One of the IT managers told me, "But only senior executives get bigger monitors." In Vietnam, I noticed, the size of your monitor is relative to your position in the company. It's a symbol of the corporate hierarchy. As an outsider, I have to try to work within the hierarchy.

Similarly, team members in Asian cultures work toward the good of the company and refrain from individual accomplishments like we do in the United States. So rather than assigning individuals to various aspects of a project, I try to break up project assignments into teams. This difference can be illustrated with two phrases. In Asia they say, "The tallest tree gets knocked down by the wind first," whereas in the U.S. we say, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease."

ON THE MOVE

200 million
People across the globe who live and work abroad—more than twice the number 25 years ago

66%
Professionals who consider international experience important to their employers

Professionals who say working globally…

Enhanced their salaries **72%**

Benefited their careers **77%**

Source: *Global Professionals on the Move—2013*, Hydrogen Group

> "As a senior leader, asking for input was seen as weak instead of a mark of inclusiveness. People looked at me as if to say, 'You're the boss—why are you asking me?'"
>
> —Sharon Mullan

PHOTO BY GARETH BROWN

ADAPTING APPROACHES

Sharon Mullan, director, PMO Academy, Hong Kong

I came to Hong Kong from the United Kingdom three years ago, after 25 years managing international projects in the financial services sector. One of my last roles in the United Kingdom was head of program management for the Financial Services Authority. I headed out East with my husband, who is also a project manager, primarily because we wanted a different challenge and figured a new country and a new culture would deliver that. Arriving in Hong Kong, first I spent 18 months as head of program management for a multinational insurance company. There were huge rewards of working in a multicultural project; the learning on both sides was immense. I would encourage people to invest time in learning about the culture they are going to work in before taking up a leadership role, as we did, to get the best out of the experience.

It's been enlightening to see the cultural differences between the United Kingdom and Asia through the lens of project management. In Hong Kong, as in much of Asia, stakeholder management skills are challenged by the predominantly hierarchical cultures. No one would challenge the head of program management, apart from the West-

erners—which might sound good for senior team members like me, but we are not always right. As a senior leader, asking for input was seen as weak instead of a mark of inclusiveness. People looked at me as if to say, "You're the boss—why are you asking me?"

One of the biggest challenges I faced was in trying to run risk workshops, as any intimation that things may go wrong definitely runs counter to the culture, and staff wouldn't speak up in front of more senior team members as this is seen as disrespectful. The solution I devised: Do one-on-one or peer-group-only risk reviews, and keep seniors out of team meetings.

Motivating teams is very different in Hong Kong. Whereas in the United Kingdom senior staff would buy drinks on social nights, it's not appreciated in Hong Kong. Instead, I bought the team lunch, sat around the table, shared dim sum and ran "brown bag sessions," which were small, informal lunchtime learn-ins. Getting people to speak up in larger team meetings was so tough that we used to plant questions in the audience to ensure that topics were brought out in the open without the local teams losing face.