

26 Know the culture of your team

Every team has its own way of working, and when you start working with new people you need to appreciate the existing culture. Each team member will already have preconceived ideas about you and the others, at both an individual and a departmental level, before you even hold your first meeting. Trying to work out and understand these views will help you appreciate the culture of your new team and how best to make them work together successfully.

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CULTURAL PROCESSES

Problems created by cultural diversity and the different ways in which teams work can be acutely obvious when your new team is based in another country, as Rasmus Kolind found out. He was sent to Spain for a year to set up a new process-improvement initiative in one of his company's call centres.

'We migrated a number of processes,' Kolind says, 'with the aim of improving them after the migration.' The Madrid call centre was handling work from four other countries, and Kolind had to implement the Six Sigma methodology for process improvement to increase efficiency. 'We were trying to implement something completely alien to the Spanish way of working, in a different language, and a different culture,' he says. Kolind, a Dane educated in the USA, travelled to Spain with two British colleagues and was very aware of the need to understand the differences in the way the cross-cultural team approached the project. They worked closely with the local Madrid team to lay the foundations for the launch of the new methodology. 'We had to take the approach "Let's understand what you do now" and not assume anything. They were a really close bunch of people, and initially it was important to be liked,' Kolind says. 'The first group we needed to convince was the Spanish leadership team.' He realized that it was essential to adapt to the local way of working in order to achieve anything. Kolind put his Spanish language skills to work, as he knew that conversing in the same language would be one of the secrets to success. This approach paid off. Kolind explains: 'The leadership team took time to get on board, but what was important was that we avoided saying "I know the answer . . . here you go."'

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DEFINITION

Fons Trompenaars and Peter Woolliams define culture as 'a series of rules and methods which a society or organization has evolved to deal with the regular problems that face it . . . Culture is to the organization what personality is to the individual – a hidden yet unifying theme that provides meaning, direction

and mobilization that can exert a decisive influence on the overall ability of the organization to deal with the challenges it faces'.⁵¹

It is precisely because culture is so ingrained in the way people work, and the way in which a company is organized, that it is sometimes difficult to spot what a team take for granted about how they do their jobs. Even a project team made up of people of just one nationality will have a particular culture, evolved from the organization's own corporate culture. Corporate culture manifests itself in many ways. Do they gel quickly and spend every Friday evening at the pub? If appropriate, consider going to the pub a few times so they get to know you. Do they keep information to themselves? If so, foster a culture of sharing information by encouraging them to outline their contributions to the project at your team meetings, and help them to see the advantages. Does the company have a culture of long tenure? Do they come from departments with strong hierarchical structures? If they have held their positions for a long time, be aware that they might resent you setting them tasks. Get used to making a quick call to their line managers so you can approach each new activity with 'I've run this phase past x and y and they agree the next steps are . . .' Even if you can identify what makes your newly formed team tick, how will this help you manage the project?⁵² Being aware of the preferred style of your team will help you relate to them and will help you understand how to get the best from them.



HINT

Co-locating your team (having members based physically close to each other) contributes to project success. Research done by the US Civil Engineering Research Foundation shows that co-location contributes to effective decision making and attention to detail and helps the team form a partnership. Projects where the team members were not based together suffered from poor communication, procurement problems and lack of direction.⁵³



GOLDEN RULES

Cultural awareness, whether inter-country or within a company, will help you get where you are going more smoothly.

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