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Cross-Cultural Lessons for Project Teams by Tom Verghese

Dr. Tom Verghese is Principal and Founder of Cultural Synergies. His work helps organizations perform at optimal levels, improving cross-border staff engagement, communication, and relationships. Expert in the field of cultural intelligence, Tom applies a practical approach in helping organizations understand and leverage cultural awareness and diversity to successfully position their businesses in the global marketplace. The following is from Tom's January blog on Cross-Cultural Factors in Project Management.

"About 8 months ago we began discussions with an IT project manager who was overseeing a project with people from 4 different countries and spanning 2 very different organisations. This was a large digital transformation project with high stakes for both sides. We suggested at that point that it would be useful to bring the teams together in order to create alignment, establish project guidelines and discuss how cultural differences could impact the project. The key stakeholder was lukewarm to the suggestion as he felt that having been involved in numerous management of projects, he already had the requisite experience and therefore it wasn't a high priority.

Fast forward and 8 months on, the project is already behind schedule, there are cost overruns, there is tremendous resistance from the client group, a lack of trust is evident with people withholding information and lastly a sense of 'one team' is absent from the project team.

From a cultural 'lens,' there are some key factors that are hindering the success of the project. One of these is the organisational cultures. In this situation, one is a private enterprise and the other is government run. They both have distinct ways of operating, expectations and norms around providing feedback, conflict management, trust building, ways of working, diversity, values and purpose. The fundamental conversations on these topics when starting the project were not established. **Another factor is that there are people from four different countries involved and there has been no appreciation of how cultural background influences our world views and**

behaviours. Finally, the project team members are individuals who bring their own biases to the project.

Some suggestions on how to minimise project derailment based on our work with numerous project teams around the world would be:

1. If possible, bring everyone together for a face-to-face workshop before commencing the project. This helps to build relationships, break down barriers, and creates personal connections.
2. Discuss the topic of cultural differences and similarities and the impact culture can have on communication, team work, and conflict.
3. Establish guidelines on how the project team will operate in terms of responsiveness to emails and communication, providing feedback, managing conflict and decision-making.
4. Schedule regular check-ins, especially in the early days of the project, as this enables you to assess progress, make adjustments and re-calibrate.
5. At the completion of the project, have a debrief to appraise the lessons learnt and how they can be applied to the successful delivery of future projects."

Considerable research indicates that investing in improved cultural intelligence can significantly improve the bottom line. According to [McKinsey Research](), "More diverse companies, we believe, are better able to win top talent and improve their customer orientation, employee satisfaction, and decision making, and all that leads to a virtuous cycle of increasing returns. This in turn suggests that other kinds of diversity—for example, in age, sexual orientation, and experience (such as a global mind-set and cultural fluency)—are also likely to bring some level of competitive advantage for companies that can attract and retain such diverse talent."

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