

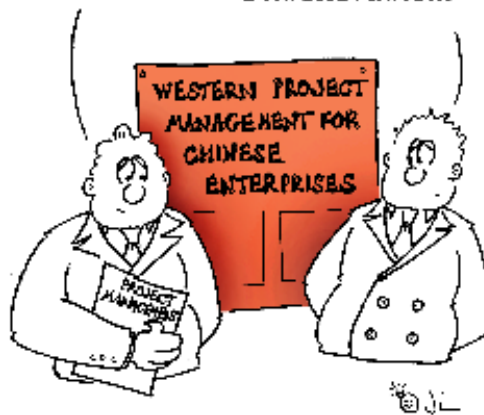
In last month's Lucid Thought we discussed the topic of conflict in project management and how conflict can be turned into an opportunity, but to do so means addressing the issues with the other party, not avoiding it altogether. We had cause to think about this again last week during delivery of project management education in Hong Kong, to people native to the countries of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, China, Indonesia and of course Hong Kong.

It is clear that many of the things we discuss during 'Western style' project management education, particularly topics such as conflict management and leadership, are perceived differently in 'Eastern' countries and cultures.

Much has been written about national cultural differences and project management, most recently with a focus on developing markets. **Two recent papers, published in the International Journal of Project Management and Project Management Journal respectively reported studies looking at project management implementation in China.** The emerging view is that while project management is valued as a vehicle to drive delivery of change and other desired outputs and that Eastern managers recognise the power of the temporary, cross-disciplinary team in accomplishing the work, there are aspects of Western style project management that are deeply counter-cultural and that need to be accommodated

"I told them to 'horizontalize the authority flow situation' and they didn't get it..."

"Unbelievable..."



for project management to be successful.

Let's look at some examples that arose in our work last week. One of the topics we discussed was "where and what types of conflict might be found across the project life cycle?" and "what role should the project manager play in resolving this conflict?" It was raised that many of the conflicts that arise are between the project manager and sponsor, particularly when the sponsor demands project completion quicker, cheaper or better than originally planned. All of the participants from Eastern countries expressed practical concerns with any notion of 'pushing back' on the sponsor's demands, or even having a 'straight' conversation with the sponsor about what it would take to speed up delivery or hold scope and quality whilst reducing costs. Confucian principles such as

zhongyong require people to promote harmony by avoiding direct confrontation and using compromising or smoothing tactics. Although good conflict resolution is 'soft on the person, yet hard on the issue', the Eastern approach will be far less direct than that adopted by many Westerners.

The problem compounds however as project managers who cannot find a way of addressing conflict with the sponsor in a culturally acceptable way then accept impossible targets and in some cases end up failing. This causes yet more problems, with the Confucian principle of mianzi driving a need to save the face of

not only oneself, but more importantly others.

There are many more examples that project managers working in Eastern cultures find difficult to accept when learning project principles based on the syllabus of a Western professional body. A high task/low relationship (telling) situational leadership style is an alien notion and some stakeholder engagement strategies possible in some places would be impossible in others. Similarly, the approach to risk identification adopted by many through group brainstorming sessions doesn't work - the plan for a 'free-wheeling' discussion ends up with a stilted discussion dominated by the senior, more powerful team members. Those who are junior or less powerful do not speak their mind and therefore many risks go unidentified.

Project management as originally conceived relies on clear roles and responsibilities understood across a temporary, cross-functional team. Underpinning this are some expectations for communication, leadership, team-working and conflict management that people raised in an Anglo-Saxon culture find relatively easy to comprehend. The skills of communication, leadership and conflict management may be difficult to develop for all people, but the principles based on flat-ish structures, willingness to take risks, acceptance of 'achievement over harmony' and recognition of individuals over and above the collective tend to be accepted as appropriate in the West. But in an increasing global context, should our acceptance of the 'right' style to adopt in getting stakeholders engaged and the team working well together be challenged?

The article mentioned earlier, published in Project Management Journal, includes the table below which goes a long way in explaining the things we see and hear. It contrasts the Anglo-Saxon (labelled as Western) values and beliefs embedded in 'Bodies of Knowledge' with Chinese values and beliefs. Other Eastern countries are not all like China - but the tendencies hold.

'Western' PM Values/Beliefs	Chinese Values/Beliefs
<p>Integration Management:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encouraging disagreement to be surfaced Requiring people to be direct and open Regarding confrontation strategy as the best way of resolving conflict Weak uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede) 	<p>Doctrine of the Mean:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encouraging disagreement to be buried Requiring people being less confrontational and less direct Using compromising and smoothing (accommodating) strategies to solve conflict Strong uncertainty avoidance
<p>Horizontal Management:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small power distance (Hofstede) Cross-functional communication and cooperation Influencing and coordinating ability important 	<p>Strong Hierarchy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large power distance Superior-subordinator vertical work relationships Line authority and control important
<p>Team Consciousness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short-term orientation of relationships Work contributions oriented evaluation of people Project team of high diversity Everyone plays important roles 	<p>Family Consciousness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encouraging long-term orientation of relationships Guanxi-oriented (personal relationships) evaluation of people Family members are homogeneous Only elite play important roles
<p>Task Orientation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completing the task Viewing people by their work performance 	<p>Boss orientation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making the boss happy Viewing people by their hierarchical position

Adapted from Cultural Barriers to the Use of Western Project Management in Chinese Enterprises; - Xiaojin Wang and Lanfeng Liu - Project Management Journal - September 2007. Hofstede refers to the social scientist Geert Hofstede who has published seminal works on culture in organisations. The terms 'uncertainty avoidance' and 'power distance' come from his work.



So what can we learn from all this? We know we are all different and there is **'no right way'** but this is emphasised even more in the world of projects and project management. We cannot expect those we work with who are from different cultural backgrounds to behave and react the way we do - and that applies equally to working across European countries as it does to more 'far flung' destinations. Our strategies for delivering projects and programmes need to reflect this and team structures, roles and communication expectations need to be clearly understood by all with people working across cultures for the first time need to be prepared. Perhaps also, the 'Western' professional bodies with objectives of global domination need to consider whether their examination expectations are also truly global?

In the final analysis, none of this means that projects are more difficult to deliver per se in one part of the world than another. But we must learn to work within the reality of the cultural norms and not expect that the effects of deep history can be swept away.

So we end for a second month running with conflict management, the roots of which we 'Westerners' must recognise as being founded on 'Eastern' principles.

Working with people and their energy, recognising constraints or barriers and channelling that into a better long-term solution is what we believe project management is all about.

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