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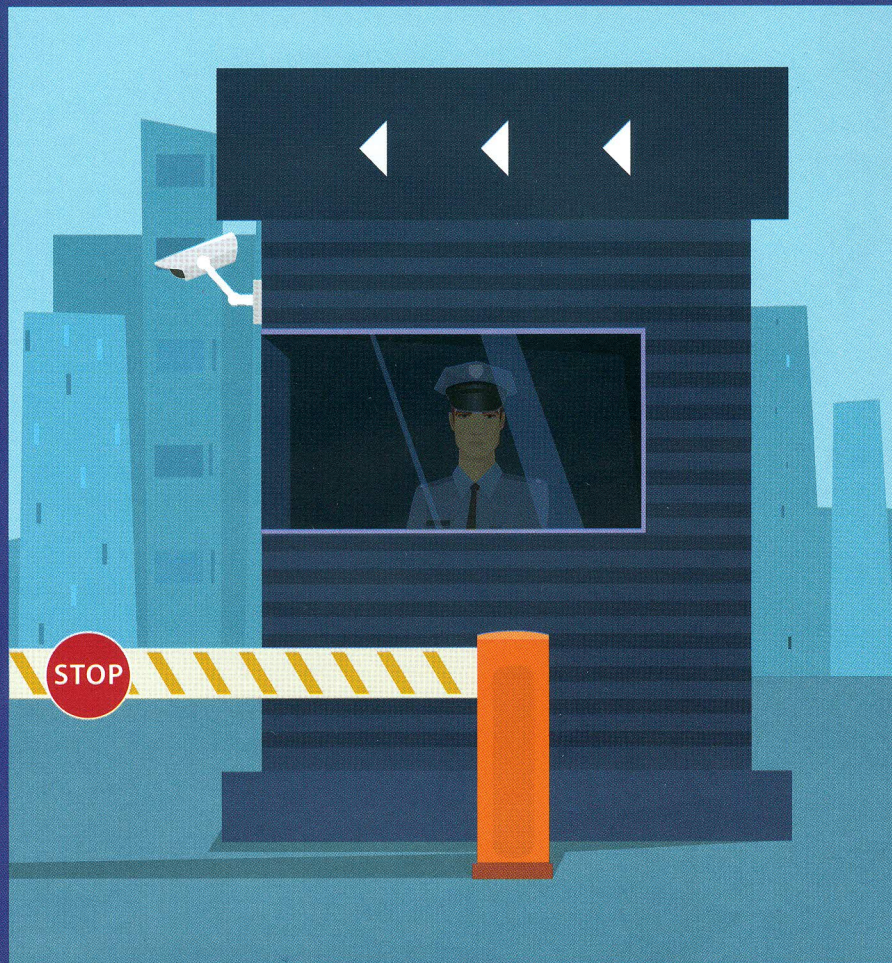


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Instilling Trust Across Borders:

A Guide for International Project Managers

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Project Managers know that building and maintaining trust with team members is an important ingredient for success. But how about when team members are of different national cultures and the team operates on a virtual basis? Can the same principles of managing trust for a domestic team who work face-to-face apply to a team operating across cultures and time zones? I think not, based on my experiences with the NASA International Project Management Program (IPM) and from working with various global multicultural companies.

The Importance of Trust

Trust is the glue that holds international teams together. High-performance multicultural teams consciously develop a strong foundation of professional trust. They count on each other, rely on constant, top quality commitment and communication, and promise only what they can deliver. High levels of trust create speed and momentum.

Stephen M. R. Covey, in his best-selling book "The Speed of Trust," (2006) makes a strong case that low levels of trust slow down everything: every decision, every communication, every relationship. Covey then sets out to show how high levels of trust produce speed.

Think about it. How much wasted time do you spend checking up on a team members performance when you do not trust they will carry out their tasks on time and to the level you would like? This slows down everything and jeopardizes project milestones and timelines. On the other hand, when trust has been established as a core operating principle, you can be sure that most members are performing as expected at a high level.

Cultural Interpretations of Trust

In order for an International Project Manager (IPM) to instill trust with and among her or his multicultural project team, it is necessary to understand what trust means in the other cultures represented among team members. A major mistake for an IPM is to assume that trust means much the same thing all over the world and that being trusted goes along with the team leader position. A gross assumption I have seen time and again is "they trust me because I was placed in charge of the team."

Management of Time

One of the ways in which culture programs our minds is how we view and manage time. A useful way for international project managers to understand and manage time differences is the concept of Monochronic versus Polychronic cultures. These terms come from the work of Edward Hall (1959) and refer to a culture's treatment of time - Monochronic meaning one view and use of time, and Polychronic meaning many uses and time interpretations. This can be used to anticipate how culture affects projects and the behavior of team members.

Monochronic Cultures Low Context / High Content

- Take time commitments seriously
- Adhere religiously to plans
- Emphasize promptness
- Short-term relationships
- Do one thing at a time
- Value privacy
- Respect for private property; seldom borrow or lend

Polychronic Cultures High Context / Low Content

- Time commitments are an objective to aim for
- Change plans often and easily
- Base promptness on the relationship
- Lifetime relationships
- Do many things at once
- Value people and relationships
- Reciprocal obligations; borrow and lend often and easily

Below are examples of how trust differs across cultures. Specifically, in the U. S., South Korea and Mexico.

The U. S. The business culture in the U. S. is Monochronic and Low Context. Direct, linear thinking is the approach in which you are expected to get straight to the point, such as "don't beat around the bush;" "cut to the chase;" and, "give me the bottom line." What is said matters most (i. e. content) and how it is said is secondary.

A phrase that is used by Americans in referring to trust is those who can be trusted "tell the truth quickly" when things are not going so well. It is assumed that everyone has the same understanding of what truth means and that quickly means as soon as possible. It is okay to say this to the boss, even if she or he is responsible for the bad situation. Direct communication to the boss is expected, and when it is not done, the boss assumes that the subordinate or team member is hiding something and cannot be trusted. Another phrase that is used is that those who are most trustworthy "do what they say they will do," on time and according to schedule. It is assumed that



expectations are clearly understood and a commitment has been made. When expectations are not met, the IPM not only judges that the person is not performing, but that she or he cannot be trusted.

For managing American team members and building trust, the IPM should adjust to direct communication with little attention to context. The more direct and on time the better. Wasting time on the context of communication (how things are said, when, and to whom) is a bad thing.

South Korea. The Korean society is based on Confucianism, a philosophy from the 14th century that survives today. It lays out mutual obligations in which the individual is a part of the social organism. It is important to know the position and age of another person in order to determine how to relate to her or him. There is a strong sense of hierarchy and top-down decision making.

An individual is always conscious of who he or she is in the social system, where the concept of "face" is very important. Maintaining face protects one's sense of dignity, self-respect and respectability. Saving face helps to promote harmonious relationships and the development of mutual reciprocity, where favors and obligations are returned. Once face is damaged by another, it is extremely difficult to be regained.

It is not surprising, then, that the Korean culture has a High Context and Indirect style of communication in order save one's face and not damage another. Detours are taken, how what is said is important and there is a reluctance to say "no." A Korean who says "yes" to someone of another culture may just be acknowledging what was said and not agreement.

Building and maintaining trust with a Korean therefore requires an IPM to adjust leadership and communication style so that face is maintained.

Mexico. Building trust with a Mexican team member requires an IPM to understand the deep relationship-based culture of Mexico and how this affects many aspects of behavior, including a sense of time. An IPM must spend some time to develop a personal

relationship with a team member, which is closely linked to trust. Mexicans are a Polychronic culture, in which time commitments are not absolute, but an objective to aim for and promptness is based on relationships. They are also High Context and Indirect, where maintaining a relationship characterizes communication (what is said is secondary to how it is said and to whom).

Trust in the Mexican culture is closely associated with respect (respeto in Spanish). While respecting others is important in many cultures, for a Mexican it is personal and emotional. Knowing as much as possible about who the person is (the "whole vs a segmented view of the person") and demonstrating that knowledge is the way to build a trusting relationship. A Mexican would view a successful IPM as being "simpatico"—strong technical leader, but also someone who is likeable and showing respect.



Instilling Trust

Once you have studied the cultures of your team members and made a plan for how to relate to each of them, the following are steps to take to instill trust as an operating principle for your team.

Expectations. The first step is to clarify expectations. If someone does not meet your expectations on an important task or on a consistent basis, that person loses your trust. But are



you certain that your expectations were clearly understood and committed to? Maybe this person's performance was meeting her or his understanding of what was expected. In communicating expectations across languages and cultures, it is not what you say, but what the listener hears. Have the team members express your expectations back to you to ensure congruence.

Create Transparency. A high level of trust can be instilled when team members know their manager is sharing all information with them on a timely basis. Transparency begins with the leader. Knowledge is power, so an IPM may believe keeping information to him or herself may enhance power, but it only destroys trust. When some information cannot be fully shared because of sensitive national security issues, proprietary data or another legitimate reason, this should not be hidden, but explained to the team.

Practice Accountability. In order for members of an international project team to be accountable for their responsibilities, this must start with the IPM. When team members see the manager is not accountable for what he or she has committed to do, trust is lost.

Conduct a “More Of / Less Of” Exercise

A simple but very effective exercise for an IPM is to conduct a behavioral exercise with the team. Explain and discuss the subjects in this article, then make a template like the following.

In order to instill trust among our team we need to do:

MORE OF

LESS OF

Have the team members think about what is going on and list all of the things that they need to do more of and less of in order to build and maintain trust among the team. Then, organize these lists into a realistic set of positive goals for the team. Communicate them back to the team and get commitment for goal achievement from everyone.

Conclusion

Instilling trust in an international project team is a challenging process that requires an IPM to go beyond business goals, budgets, tasks and milestones. Time and effort must also be taken to focus on team process and communication. The concept of “going slow to go fast” really applies here, where getting it right with trust in the beginning can pay off down the road and lead to increased levels of performance and heightened speed for the team.



For some 18 years, Dr. Tucker was a faculty member of the NASA IPM program. Twice each year, NASA IPMS from the various NASA sites met at the Kennedy Space Center with their international colleagues from all over the world. NASA works with over 100 countries. Among the 40 or so participants were those representing the European Space Agency (ESA), the Japanese Space Agency (JAXSA) and others.

