



International Project Groups – Culture-Related Differences in Working Processes

When project teams are international and serious conflicts arise between colleagues from different countries, it is often not clear to those in charge that culture-related differences may have been the trigger.

Marion Quaas-Reinhard
Senior Consultant
MACHWÜRTH TEAM
INTERNATIONAL



Economic change

The business world became increasingly international after the Second World War. The trend continues to this day and there is no end in sight. Indeed, there is hardly a company today that does not operate across borders by carrying on export trade, relying on partnerships abroad or establishing foreign subsidiaries. This development process places special working requirements on managers and personnel developers in addition to the usual challenges they face at the national level.

They face challenges such as successfully harmonising different work styles, values and mentalities. International conferences or projects bring people together with different opinions, attitudes and ways of reacting. Different notions of reliability, authority, price/performance ratio, punctuality, work ethic, etc., can greatly affect the effectiveness of international teams. This often leads to confusion, misunderstanding, anger and defiance.

An example: A multinational corporation based in Germany sent several American experts to Germany for a specific project. Not long after the American-German project team star-

ted working, the first problems also arose: It wasn't possible to work properly due to blockage. The first members of the team changed jobs and one of the Americans travelled back home in anger.

There was an unusual high number of conflicts in the course of the project and within a year all but one of the Americans had resigned and returned to the United States. More Americans were sent, the turnover of German team members was unusually high, the schedule was exceeded and the project leader was changed for the third time.

What had happened?

- The transfer of know-how did not work. The Germans accused the Americans of not passing on their knowledge. The Americans, however, felt that the Germans were not asking any questions and showing too little initiative.
- The meetings were not producing any useful results. The Americans felt that the Germans were talking too in-depth and in too much detail. The American colleagues, by contrast, were criticised for being unfocused and not making any significant contributions, only to constantly pester the Germans afterwards with many questions.

- The Germans also considered that their American colleagues were working too superficially. They felt they were thus constantly having to rework the quality and were only obtaining a product that was "patched together".
- The Americans accused the German boss of not setting any "proper" objectives. Nor was he ever giving them any feedback, and so they were being left completely in the dark.

A number of further points could be added to this list. The working atmosphere was now being poisoned by disputes and ongoing conflicts.

The third project leader suspected that the cultural differences between the Americans and the Germans were playing a major role in the conflict and decided to seek professional advice. It was found that many German-American teams – irrespective of the industry or departments involved – were experiencing similar problems. In a subsequent emergency meeting, the team then addressed, reviewed and reflected on the intercultural issues. The "usual" difficulties in the implementation of a project had been considerably increased by the conflicts arising from the cultural differences. It was only by analysing

the expectations that these patterns could be revealed and counteracted. This example shows how important it is to address the culture of the respective country in order to successfully organise a long-term international cooperation. Moreover, it is necessary to understand the respective cultures in order to make those involved aware of the differences and be able to combine them effectively. What are the specific differences between the German and the American way of working?

The typical German project planning phase

Every German manager is familiar with it: Numerous consultation and meeting dates adorn the calendar. These meetings often take up a lot of time, sometimes even several hours. The reason is that Germans are accustomed, upon receipt of a work order, to collect all relevant data and discuss it. The goal is to achieve the most comprehensive possible assessment of the problems to be solved. To do so, a wide range of detailed information is discussed in order to ultimately integrate this into the big picture. Concepts are developed to capture the relationships between the different aspects. This often results in very complex discussions about the field of action. The mode of thought is relatively complicated and abstract. Concepts are developed in advance of the actual action, involving relationships, as well as various possibilities and facets. Logical conclusions are made, and possibly arising contingencies and interconnection are discussed. The aim is to get a picture of the problem that is as all-encompassing as possible.

The Germans like to use theoretical and scientific findings as the basis of their deliberations. Existing empirical values are also often included and team members consider to what extent these could be helpful for the upcoming planning. New ideas are first examined critically and are incorporated into the concept only if the result of the review is positive. Finally, this wealth of information and thoughts is developed into a plan and the objective is defined.

During this first phase of work all those involved are expected to participate in the discussion process by contributing all of their concerns and the most important aspects of their know-how. All participants are thus actively involved in the development of the concept. In the second step, a joint decision is made about which solution steps and subtasks need to be addressed first. This decision is finally regarded as accepted and supported by all involved. The third phase consists of allocating the various tasks. Depending on their level of knowledge and interests, participants accept responsibility for the tasks and confirm this by saying something like "I'll take care of this!"

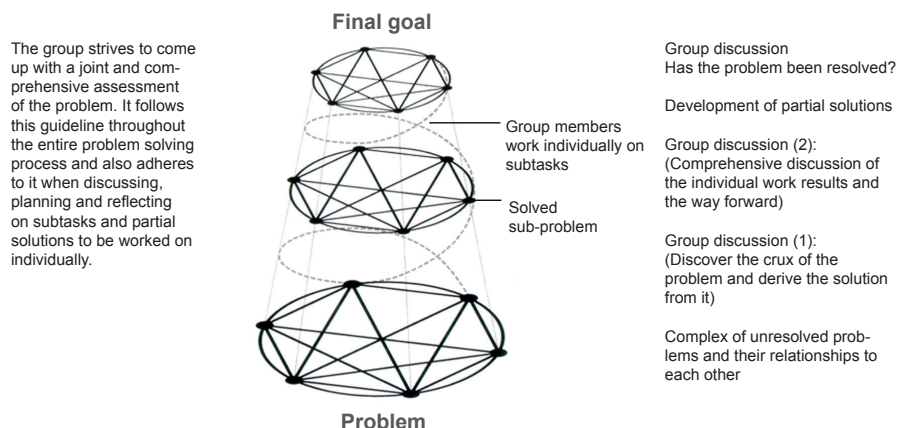
These first three phases characterise the German planning phase.

The typical German project execution phase

This phase is characterised by the execution of the subtasks. As the previous phase already clarified the essential and basic aspects, there is only a very limited need for communication between colleagues in the execution phase. Germans tend to work on their task independently and are also expected to be capable of doing so. The previous planning phase was after all meant to enable them to work independently and alone. There is little conversation among colleagues about the details of their work since the details have already been clarified and there is thus no need to do so again. Employees present their results once they have finished their respective subtasks.

Upon reaching an intermediate stage in which intensive communication seems useful, group meetings are convened. This is used as an opportunity to discuss problems in the group and to ask questions such as: "What are you working on at the

Prototype of a German problem-solving process

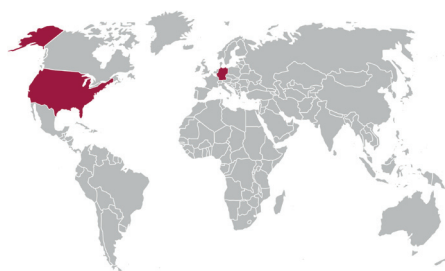


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moment? How are you doing?" The purpose of these contacts is to avoid losing sight of the big picture. An essential aspect of these meetings is to check the results. This intermediate phase is used to once again consider and discuss the problem comprehensively, only that this time such discussions are based on the state of knowledge that has been reached in the meantime. The progress made so far is discussed on this basis. The group takes on an important role in this phase by providing food for thought and by incorporating as many material aspects as possible into the construction of the big picture. The holistic approach of this "big picture" thinking always makes it possible to explain the reasons for a given action. This is also required to be possible. If necessary, the phases are repeated until the final goal is reached. Germans are reluctant to allow any changes to this process. They work as strictly as possible according to what was developed in the planning phase. Decisions are agreed as binding, one sticks as closely as possible to what one says, and one complies with agreements - which is also demanded of the others involved. Germans are reliable. They also assume that there is no need to make any changes, since everyone adheres to what was decided in the planning phase, which can only be right. And what is right does not need to be changed. Avoiding errors is an important aspect and there are thus regular checks for this in the intermediate stages. Germans consider something to be right until it has actually shown to be otherwise and as long as this does not happen, no changes are made. Why fix something that isn't broken?

However, once errors requiring changes to be made have actually

occurred, the entire problem-solving process is reopened again from the point at which the error was discovered. This is a lot of work, there is concern about the previously unconsidered effects a change could have and the entire holistic thought process is repeated once more – now taking the error into account. If the error is not too serious, no changes are made after all, as the cost would be too high. The German boss takes on an integrating and unifying role in this process. On the one hand, he must help recognise the overarching concept in the big picture and repeatedly draw attention to it in order to derive the individual steps from it and reflect on them. On the other hand, he has to keep the group together and help find a consensus. On a professional level, this means that he is the group's best technical expert, familiar with the exact details of matters and understands the larger context. His employees also expect this: the boss must contribute to the thought process, and is held responsible for any wrong decision.



On a social level, a German boss will be careful not to lead by giving orders. He convinces rather than commands. This means that he prefers to reach an agreement with his employees and to coordinate things with them rather than to make decisions alone and then impose these on them. In this context, objections and efforts to convince the group are things the

employees expect and they also occur. The idea is to find the best solution after all. In case of conflict, it is then up to the boss to decide and in the end the employees will follow his lead. Americans, in comparison, typically work according to a completely different pattern. The differences between the approaches to work can – as in the example described above – have dramatic consequences if they are not brought to mind. }