Chapter 12: Culture and Project Management

12.1   What is Organizational Culture?

When working with internal and external customers on a project, it is essential to pay close attention to relationships, context, history and the organizational culture. Corporate culture refers to the beliefs, attitudes, and values that the organization's members share and to the behaviors consistent with them (that they give rise to). Corporate culture sets one organization apart from another, and dictates how members of the organization will see you, interact with you, and sometimes judge you. Often, projects too have a specific culture, work norms and social conventions.

Some aspects of corporate culture are easily observed; others are more difficult to discern. You can easily observe the office environment and how people dress and speak. In one company individuals work separately in closed offices; in others, teams may work in shared environments. The more subtle components of corporate culture, such as the values and overarching business philosophy, may not be readily apparent, but they are reflected in member behaviors, symbols and conventions used.

12.2   Project Manager's Checklist:

Once the corporate culture has been identified, members should try to adapt to the frequency, formality, and type of communication customary in that culture. This adaptation will strongly affect project members' productivity and satisfaction internally, as well as with the client-organization.

- Which stakeholders will make the decision in this organization on this issue? Will your project decisions and documentation have to go up through several layers to get approval? If so, what are the criteria and values that may affect acceptance there? For example, is being on schedule the most important consideration? Cost? Quality?

- What type of communication among and between stakeholders is preferred? Do they want lengthy documents? Is "short and sweet" the typical standard?

- What medium of communication is preferred? What kind of medium is usually chosen for this type of situation? Check the files to see what others have done. Ask others in the organization.

- What vocabulary and format are used? What colors and designs are used? (i.e., at Hewlett-Packard (HP), all rectangles have curved corners)

12.3 Project Team Challenges

Today's globally-distributed organizations (and projects) consist of people who have a different "worldview". Worldview is a looking glass through which [people] see the world as quoted by Bob Shebib (Shebib, 2003. p. 296): "[It is] a belief system about the nature of the

universe, its perceived effect on human behavior, and one's place in the universe. Worldview is a fundamental core set of assumptions explaining cultural forces, the nature of humankind, the nature of good and evil, luck, fate, spirits, the power of significant others, the role of time, and the nature of our physical and natural resources."

If, for example, a US manager is sent to India to manage an R&D team or a joint-venture, s/he is likely to have to "[cope] with eco-shock or the physiological, psychological, and social reaction to a new assignment ecology". Hanging one's shingle in a fluid and culturally-diverse organization, project team and work culture; new working relationships and hidden challenges have significant implications for performance and knowledge exchange – for the manager and his/her colleagues at home and in the host country.

In most situations there is simply **no** substitute for having a well-placed person from the host culture to guide the new person through the cultural nuances of getting things done. In fact, if this 'intervention' isn't present, it is likely to affect the person's motivation or desire to continue trying to break through the cultural (and other) barriers. Indeed, optimal effectiveness in such situations requires learning of developing third-world cultures or international micro cultures, shared perceptions among the culturally diverse task participants on how to get things done. Project leaders require sensitivity and awareness of multicultural preferences. The following broad areas should be considered:

- Individual identity and role within project vs. family-of-origin and community

- Verbal and emotional expressiveness

- Relationship expectations

- Style of communication

- Language

- Personal priorities, values and beliefs

- Time Orientation

There are many interpersonal dynamics and intra-project challenges faced by a globally-distributed team. Individual members and the team itself requires important social supports to mitigate uncertainty, conflict, motivational challenges, culture shock and the more-encompassing eco-shock– that comes from facing head-on the unfamiliar and diverse situations consistent with a different cultural and distributed context.

Diverse and globally distributed project teams (i.e., different ethnic cultures, genders, age, and functional capabilities) often working on complex projects spanning multiple time zones, geography and history, operating with tight deadlines in cost-conscious organizations, need to make time and resources available to physically meet each other, and connect (at the very least) at a formal 'kick-off' meeting. Especially when working with team members from high-context cultures it is essential to meet face-to-face, and discover member's individual identities, cultural preferences and share professional knowledge and personal stories; observe critical verbal and non-verbal cues (that may not easily be observed online, or on the telephone).

This is key to establishing a safer climate and building trust for stronger relationships among both team members and management.

12.4   Dealing with Conflict

The question isn't whether, when or what will create conflict among intercultural team members — or with what frequency it will occur. If a team wants to overcome (or harness) conflict for effectiveness and productivity, the question is how to navigate and resolve the conflicts. Conflict that springs from diversity can actually assist the team in completing complex problem-solving. However, if not navigated successfully, it can create relationship strain and derail achievement due to increased difficulties in communication and coordination.

As the global marketplace continues its rapid expansion, researchers are increasingly turning their attention to the issue of conflict management. Differing social and cultural values don't necessarily increase the number of conflicts a team will experience, but they can have an impact on how conflicts get managed and resolved. Cultural awareness is needed for understanding and appreciating others' values and behavioral norms. Without that, Global Holdings' foreign assignments will become an overwhelming challenge. Self-awareness and skill development can aid in resolving the problematic conflict arising from cultural differences to help the team maintain good relations and remain productive.

12.4   Bibliography for Chapter 12

See Appendix C for references.