Reaching a new level of success in Intercultural Project Management by empathy based mental concepts

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Abstract
The vicious cycle of expectation, perception, interpretation and assessment of the behaviour of one another influences project managers day by day. In project teams with team members from the same cultural background this is already complex, however less critical as expectation, perception, interpretation and evaluation of one another is culturally similar. However, if project team members with different cultural backgrounds work together in an international project, the unconscious pattern of expectation and perception leads to wrong interpretations. This is the source for all misunderstandings which leads to inefficient project processes and unproductive co-operation or even the early determination of the project. By recognizing this vicious cycle with the help of empathy building technics it is possible to learn how to break out of the pattern to become a successful international project team manager.

Keywords
Empathy, empathy based mental concepts, international project management, intercultural project management, emotional intelligence, emotional intelligence in project management

1. Introduction
The change of work takes a central role within the scope of social and management sciences. The fast spreading of new information and communication technologies represents a new step of globalization. In this globalized world the proportion of international projects continuously increases. Even small and medium sized companies work with international customers, suppliers, IT experts and colleagues. However, most of the project team members but also the project leaders are neither educated nor prepared for the new challenges they are facing through this trend.

2. Theoretical background and definitions
As there is a set of several key words in the context of empathy based mental concepts, these will be defined in the following chapter:

Empathy is “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.” (Oxford Dictionary).

Emotion is defined as “a strong feeling deriving from one’s circumstances, mood, or relationships with others” (Oxford Dictionary).

Emotional Intelligence is “the ability to perceive emotion, integrate emotion to facilitate thought, understand emotions and to regulate emotions to promote personal growth” (Salovey and Mayer, 2011).

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Goleman defined the following aspects of Emotional Intelligence:

- **Self-awareness** – the ability to know one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, drives, values and goals and recognize their impact on others while using gut feelings to guide decisions.
- **Self-regulation** – involves controlling or redirecting one's disruptive emotions and impulses and adapting to changing circumstances.
- **Social skill** – managing relationships to move people in the desired direction
- **Empathy** - considering other people's feelings especially when making decisions
- **Motivation** - being driven to achieve for the sake of achievement.

Mersino concluded in his book “Emotional Intelligence for Project Managers” (2013) the following five competences as relevant for project managers:

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social-Awareness
- Relationship Management
- Team Leadership

Intercultural competence is defined as “a set of cognitive, behavioral, and affective/ motivational components that enable individuals to adapt effectively in intercultural environments” (Abbe, Gulick, Herman, 2007). The basic requirements for intercultural competence are empathy, an understanding of other people's behaviors and ways of thinking, and the ability to express one's own way of thinking.

Concluding it can be stated that empathy is the competence that is needed as well to act emotionally intelligent as interculturally competent.

### 3. Levels of cross-cultural misunderstandings

The development of the individual personality depends on many different factors. This largely depends in what kind of society, family and especially cultural environment a person grows up in (Mead, 2005). In this sense personality is always exposed to circumstances which have a direct influence on its development. This means the cultural program, the way of how values and norms are generated, perceived and lived. Looking at a national culture the majority of people within this society will react to certain situations in a similar way. As a result the societal group perceives and interprets most reactions by group members in a similar way and therefore understands underlying and non-verbal messages. In a business, with employees from one cultural background, the understanding in behavioral and communication patterns is by far not as complex as in an international setup.

With regard to an international business setup different cultural programming of the involved parties may result in differences how cultures communicate. This means sending and receiving any kind of message (Adler, 2008). This can result in cultural misperceptions. Taking this asymmetric intercultural communication into consideration, there is great potential for misunderstandings among business partners. Due to the fact that each side has its own cultural background, each side...
will perceive the reactions of their partner in a way that is normal from the perspective of their own national culture.

There are five main levels of potential cross-cultural misunderstandings: cross-cultural misperception, cross-cultural misinterpretation, stereotypes, cross-cultural misevaluation and misunderstanding.

3.1. Cross-cultural misperceptions

“Perception is the process by which individuals select, organize, and evaluate stimuli from external environment to provide meaningful experiences for themselves” (Adler 2008). People with different cultural backgrounds tend to see the world in a different way. This implies that a person applies a perceptual filter in order to cope with everything that happens around the person. A result of perceptual filters can influence a person in such a way that they might see things that do not exist.

3.2 Cross-cultural misinterpretations

“Interpretation occurs when an individual assigns meaning to observations and their relationships; it is the process of making sense out of perceptions” (Adler 2008). Interpretation helps the individual to categorize experiences and allows making assumptions on how to tackle daily routines e.g. driving, shopping and eating. This categorization of impressions therefore also depends on the cultural background.

3.3. Stereotypes as source for misinterpretation

“Stereotyping involves a form of categorization that organizes our experience and guides our behaviour toward various groups within society.” (Adler, 2008) Stereotypes therefore never describe the behaviour of an individual; it may rather illustrate how members of a group may behave. In business stereotyping can be helpful if applied in a pragmatic way. It is useful to understand and act appropriately in new situations, such as meeting a business partner from another country for the first time. Therefore it gives first ideas how an individual from another culture may behave. It is important to consider that stereotypes are characteristics and norms which are assigned to a group. This means that an individual still may act contrary to the group norms. Applied in business an effective international manager knows how to make use of stereotypes. The person is aware of it, but by meeting somebody who does not fulfil the stereotype, the manager is able to put it aside and therefore differentiate.

3.4. Cross-cultural misevaluation

Different to perception and interpretation, cultural conditioning strongly affects the evaluation of a situation. Evaluating something means that an individual judges something, whether it is good or bad. This depends on which cultural environment the person was brought up in. Due to the fact that in most cultures a value system is imprinted from an early age and thus defines what is good or bad for an individual, people with a different cultural background might be evaluated differently. This implies that perceiving and interpreting a situation based on the own cultural background allows the next step of evaluation. (Adler, 2008)

3.5. Misunderstanding due to verbal communication

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In addition to the three levels of misunderstanding Broszinsky-Schwabe (2011) added another culture specific criterion: the language. In an intercultural context communication and therefore information asymmetries can result in severe misunderstandings. This can happen when both business parties have a different cultural background and do not share the same mother-tongue. The worst verbal misunderstanding occurs when both sides understand something different than the intended message. Therefore the interpretation and the perception of what is communicated differ significantly from the intended message.

4. Impact of emotional competence for project managers and introduction to the vicious circle of emotions

The first study on Emotional Intelligence in Project Management was conducted in 2005 by R. Turner and R. Mueller. They showed in their study of 400 projects that there is a strong correlation between emotional intelligence and project success. As a consequence they concluded that “project managers must be emotionally competent.”

It is difficult evaluate the emotional competence of managers. Today many EI assessment tools exist e.g. by Daniel Goleman, Peter Salovey, John Mayer and Rueven Bar-On. However, there is hardly any university where students and future project managers can learn emotional competence. Nevertheless, Emotional Intelligence is a competence that can be trained at all levels of age.

One important element of the training of Emotional Intelligence is to understand the pattern that runs the mind of every human being, wherever the cultural background of the person is: the vicious cycle of expectations, interpretations and resulting behaviour. Figure 1 shows this cycle that inhabits every human being:

![Fig.1: Pattern of expectation, perception and interpretation](image)

All human beings always have expectations towards the behaviour of all other people (e.g. a project team member expects that a project leader should be dominant and emotionally distant). These expectations are to a great extent culturally influenced leading to a subjective perception of the behaviour of the other (e.g. a project leader following the democratic leadership style is perceived by the team members that he does not give a clear direction). This perception leads to an interpretation of the behaviour (e.g. the opening of a discussion about a decision is interpreted as unsecurity of the project leader) which leads to an evaluation of the other person (e.g. he is a weak leader).

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The subjective evaluation provokes a certain reaction of the individual person. This is the start of a new vicious cycle, which takes place subconsciously in milliseconds. At the same time it happens also within the other person. This process influences the work of a project team to a large extent, a fact that is still not sufficiently considered in today’s project management theory and practice.

In intercultural project teams the expectations towards the other team members are not only towards their specific role in the project (e.g. project leader, project assistant, project controller aso.) but also towards the cultural prejudices of the members of the different nations (e.g. US-Americans are extroverted, Germans punctual and reliable aso.). This leads to a complex unintended chain of expectations and interpretations which have harmful consequences for projects teams. Figure 2 shows this vicious cycle concept in intercultural project teams:

![Vicious cycle concept in intercultural project teams](image_url)

Fig.2: Vicious cycle of mis-expectation, mis-perception and mis-interpretation in intercultural project teams

The wrong perception on the basis of a misexpectation towards the role and behaviour of the other team members leads to a misinterpretation of the behaviour and a wrong evaluation of the other person. The subjective evaluation provokes a certain reaction of the individual person. This is the start of a new vicious cycle, which takes place subconsciously in milliseconds. At the same time it happens also within the other person. This process influences the work of an international project team to a large extent, a fact that is still not sufficiently considered in today’s project management theory and practice.

5. Conclusion

Intercultural seminars for all project team members are needed to experience and understand that:
- the behaviour of every single person is influenced by their values and norms
- every individual does have a specific expectation on everybody else because of his/her role in a project team, his/her gender/age/cultural background etc.
- the know-how about cultural stereotypes can be used in intercultural projects in a constructive way
- how intercultural misunderstandings can be foreseen and exposed
- how to better understand the working style of the individual team members in an intercultural project

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how to use and apply this knowledge concerning target agreement, keeping of deadlines, decision taking, communication styles, escalation of problems, leadership, behaviour in meetings, etc.

Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, summarized this mental attitude during his visit to New York in 1949:

“If we seek to understand a people, we have to try to put ourselves, as far as we can, in that particular historical and cultural background. It is not easy for a person of one country to enter into the background of another country. So there is great irritation, because one fact that seems obvious to us is not immediately accepted by the other party or does not seem obvious to him at all! But that extreme irritation will go when we think that he is just differently conditioned and simply can’t get out of that condition. One has to recognize that whatever the future may hold, countries and people differ in their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. In order to understand them, we have to understand their way of life and approach. If we wish to convince them, we have to use their language as far as we can, not language in narrow sense of the word, but the language of the mind. That is one necessity. Something that goes even further than that is not the appeal to logic and reason, but some kind of emotional awareness of other people.”

References


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