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DUBAI: How to Build the Babylonian Tower Properly?

Fostering a discourse on cross-culturality,
complexity, projects, and management

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1. Exploring cross-cultural complex project management - an inter view

Set-up

This study is conceptualized as an explorative interview analysis. The interviews are qualitative and open solely structured by the interviewees' foci of attention and perception. So far I conducted 10 interviews, with interview partners from very diverging fields and backgrounds. Some work for business, others for governmental organisation, again others work in the field of academia.

Interest

The focus lies in exploring how managers, professionals, executives, and experts describe and manage their cross-cultural complex reality. Thereby I am especially interested in practical ways how to manage projects in a cross-cultural complex context. What problems occur and which solution strategies are successful?

First Results

In the following I am going to present some of the preliminary results after the first ten interviews.

The first part contains an analytical framework which I extracted out of the interviews by summarising some guiding distinctions.

The second part specifies general propositions located within this framework providing a set of rules, which may help to manage projects in a cross-cultural complex context.

The third part further elaborates these propositions in form of hypothesis for the special context of Dubai.

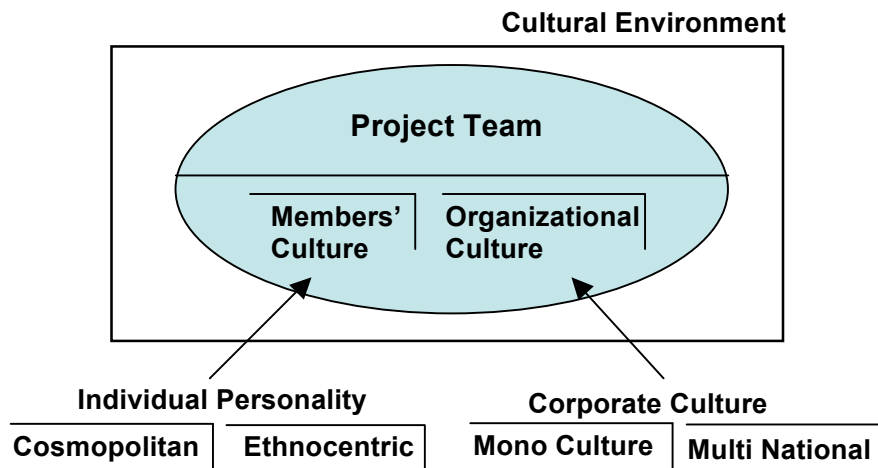


Figure 1: Framework Triple-C PM

2. A Framework for Mapping Culture

By purpose I left the definition of culture, respectively cross-culture in the context of project management open to my interview partners. Abstracting what they came up with I constructed the framework shown in Figure 1:

- The project team is embedded in a certain *cultural environment*, which comprises the culture and people outside of the project team. One could refer to it as the *Leitkultur* (core culture). For example, in the case of Dubai this culture is Arabic and Muslim.
- The project team itself consists of *team members*, each having a specific background and being socialized in their own *Leitkultur* (core culture), which influences their everyday behaviour.
- When it comes to the personality of the team members, I found another distinction between *cosmopolitan* and *ethnocentric* types. The first prefers to mix with different cultures and backgrounds and perceives cultural differences as a challenge, while the latter rather sticks with people of his background and perceives cultural differences as an obstacle.
- Furthermore, the project team is influenced by and imbedded in an organizational culture. I could identify two predominant cultures there: *Mono Culture Organizations* and *Multi National Culture Organizations*. The two differ in terms of management style, decision-making capacity, staff empowerment, responsibilities take-over, etc. The first one is characterized by decision-making of a few people, mostly the founder group or family. The decision-making capacity of the individual manager is therefore rather limited. In contrast, in Multi National Culture Organization modes of interaction are rather participatory. Also, larger organizations can be mono cultural. An indicator might be that the executive board comprises just one nationality. Career opportunities in Multi National Culture Organizations seem to be better developed, too.

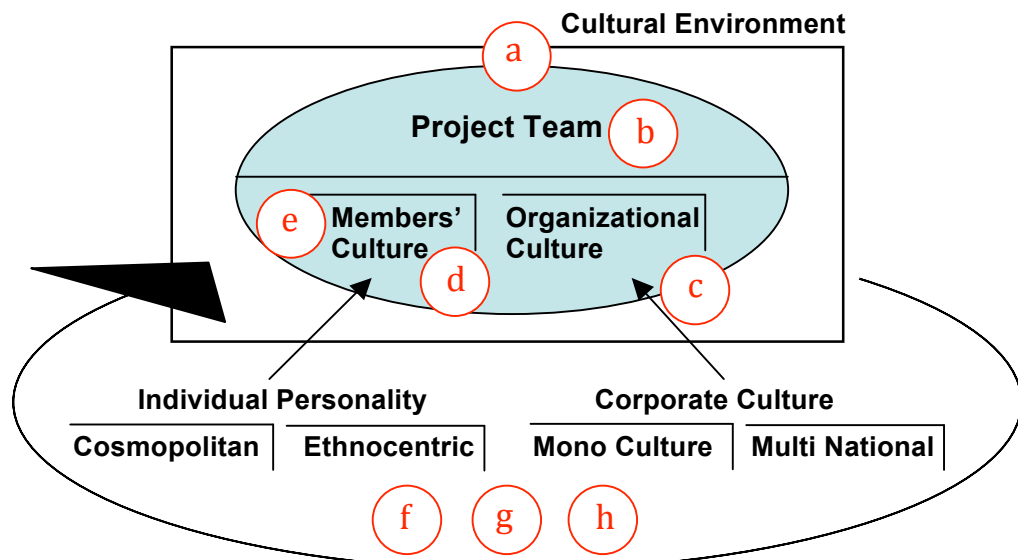


Figure 2: Framework Triple-C PM + Propositions

3. Propositions for Managing Triple-C Projects

The following propositions are rules that according to my interview partners seem to work in practice for managing projects in a cross-cultural complex context. The propositions are marked with alphabetical letters and located within the framework (see Figure 2). To be clear in one point, following all propositions does not mean that a project is going to be successful. Social behaviour is always context related and one context never resembles the other to 100 percent.

Set-up Phase

a) Guarantee connectivity:

The set-up of the project team has to guarantee the connectivity with the cultural environment. That is, the project team should at least partly reflect the surrounding culture in terms of cultural background or experience of the team members.

b) Limit the size:

The size of the project team should not exceed 20 members or in this case be split-up in decentralized subunits. Up to a size of 20 people, mouth-to-mouth conversation and coordination is still possible.

c) Avoid clusters:

Avoid cultural clusters within the team. Instead, go for a good mix of nationalities and cultural backgrounds. A team of mixed cultures will increase complexity; however a team with clusters will blockade a smooth functioning altogether.

d) Create an atmosphere of awareness:

Awareness is probably the most important competence to be developed in cross-cultural project teams. Awareness has to be internalised by each team member. Don't insist on doing the things in a certain way with reference to your culture and that it has always been that way.

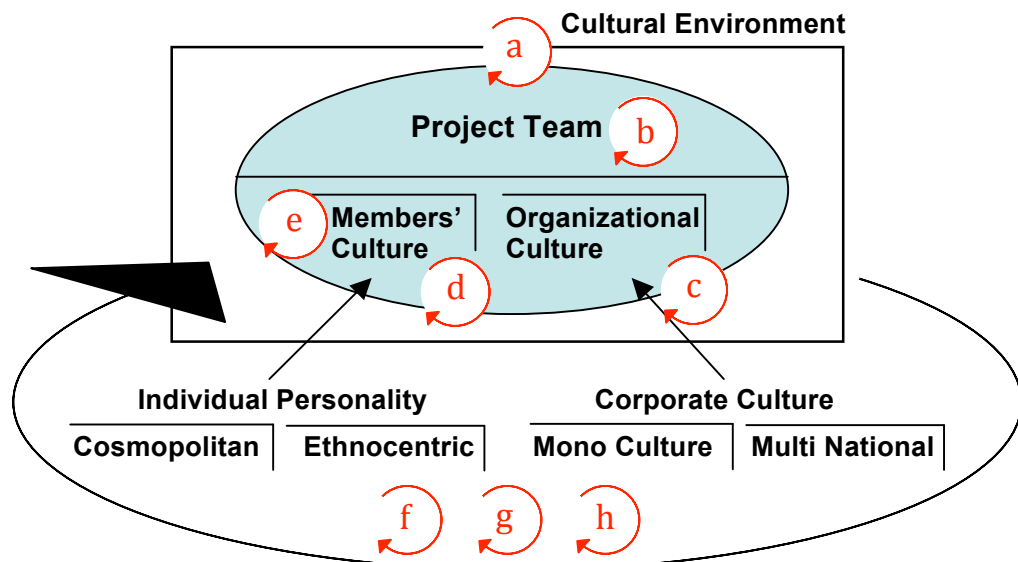


Figure 3: Framework Triple-C PM + Propositions + Circularity

Operations phase

e) Primacy of organizational culture:

When it comes to operations the primary working culture should be determined by the organizational culture not the local or Leitkultur.

f) Milestones and budget:

Bottom line the most important pillars to guarantee a proper project management are milestone and budget plans. Successful project management needs to follow up both.

g) Success factor number one: communication

Almost all of the interviews indicated that successful project management starts and ends with communication. According to them communication seem to be the most important instrument and success factor. Communication training may therefore be one crucial success factor that is often in its consequences underestimated.

h) Be prepared for excuses:

Culture is be used as an excuse not to do things. In most of the cases this is just a subterfuge. This point is again closely related to awareness, but I want to expatiate it because it seems to be of such importance.

Interfolding of phases

Although I distinguished between set-up and operation phase both phases cannot be separated from each other. In fact they are rather interfolded and have to be taken into account continuously and repeatedly. This is indicated by the circular arrows surrounding the propositions' letters (see Figure 3). Each proposition is an ongoing process in the entire project – and fostering every “step” during the whole operation might guarantee its success.

4. Application Dubai

- ___ Interpersonal relationships are the basis for successfully managing projects in Dubai. Building trust is the most important task.
- ___ Verbal communication is more important than written communication. Needs and information should be brought up via the face-to-face conversations.
- ___ English is the working language, however most people working in Dubai are not native English speakers. This creates room for misunderstandings and misinterpretations.
- ___ Foster awareness building. The greatest mistake is to justify procedures with reference to your own *Leitkultur* (“We do the things always like this!”).
- ___ Dubai is an emerging market. Therefore, the environment is more variable which leads to greater uncertainty. Calculate with eventualities and prepare yourself for them. It can be of value to have a plan B, C, D, etc.
- ___ The administration is strongly influenced by its British-Indian history, which led to a according to the book approach. Be prepared that the administration will follow rigid procedures.
- ___ Local staff still seems to show a lack of professionalism in term of qualifications and competences of the people.

5. Contact

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