

# Respect Culture or Face Failure

## *Leadership Lessons from four continents*



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**Author:** Karthik Ramamurthy  
**Co-Author:** Sripriya V. Narayanasamy

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## **Abstract Details**

Does your project team gel well? If not success will certainly elude you!

Global experts agree that this can indeed be India's century. However, global leadership and success will not happen just by luck. PMs will need to work Hard AND Smart!

During the presenters' rich experience leading global teams to success across continents (North America, Europe, South America & Asia [1]), we saw numerous cultural differences impacting virtual teams: Age, Geography, Language, Value Systems, etc. [2]

250 words being a major constraint, here's just ONE project situation (more typical cultural traits in our paper):

John from NYC: "This is the shittiest documentation I've ever seen. It is also well past the agreed deadline. What the heck?" Ravi, hailing from a small town, is shell-shocked. He stammers a few words, further angering John.

A dangerous project conflict indeed!

If you, as PM, ignore this, you invite disaster. However, you can also effectively leverage unique cultural traits towards success. [3]

Dynamic project leadership demands time investments in understanding cultural patterns.

Adopting the proven S-I-R (Situation-Impact-Resolution) approach [4], we will constantly engage the audience, covering:

1. Identifying cultural team differences & analyzing their potential positive & negative impacts
2. Planning & implementing specific actions to maximize positives & minimize negatives
3. Specific success factors in implementation and possible pitfalls
4. Attendees (two-three) encouraged to share (in short) unique cultural challenges they faced and solutions implemented.
5. Crisp summary with practical takeaways for implementation

**REFERENCES:** [1] - [4] mentioned added to the set of References at the end of this paper.

**KEYWORDS:** Project Culture, Leadership, Project Success

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## INTRODUCTION

“Hi-tech coolies!”

As late as January 2008, that was the highly derogatory term used for India's Information Technology (IT) industry talent as the country's companies were dominating this high-growth, high-visibility industry. [5]

### Shining Success

Yet, enterprising entrepreneurs, innovative business strategies and hard work of millions of bright Indian youth made India the shining star on the global IT stage.

Indian IT companies have built competencies that allow them to effectively compete on merit, not just price. Some, exhibiting exemplary leadership, have graduated to the high table of customers paying only for benefits delivered, not just for Time & Materials. That, indeed takes much confidence in one's abilities!

**Yet, all is not well in the past few years.** Our nation's early success was largely built on a large pool of educated, English-speaking resources AND on cost arbitrage.

As other nations catch up, these advantages have vanished. Recent large scale lay-offs at most IT majors is clear proof. [6]

To continue and build on our leadership, India urgently needs to shape up in terms of project success or risk being unceremoniously shipped out!

### What can we do?

How do we, as a proud nation, first avoid losing our global leadership edge and next build our cutting-edge capabilities to continue shining?

One suggested path has been to focus on innovative IT products. However, this is a long, thorny path full of dangers and intense competition from established leaders.

**A more viable path is to explore new geographies where our strategic advantages will help us confidently beat competition. However, this path will require us to effectively leverage the multiple cultural traits of team members from several continents and countries.**

The authors of this paper, together, have rich experience of over 50 man years delivering project success in four continents: Asia, Europe, North America and South America.

**Using this experience, we present valuable leadership insights on analysing, understanding, respecting and leveraging cultural strengths of team members in today's ubiquitous virtual teams.**

## MAIN BODY OF THE PAPER

### Establishing S-I-R

- a. **SITUATION:** Extremely complex scope, drastically compressed timelines & sharply reduced budgets make project success elusive. Successive Standish Group “Chaos Reports” confirm this fact.

MODERN RESOLUTION FOR ALL PROJECTS					
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
SUCCESSFUL	29%	27%	31%	28%	29%
CHALLENGED	49%	56%	50%	55%	52%
FAILED	22%	17%	19%	17%	19%

Figure 1: Modern Resolution Rates of Projects as presented in the Chaos Report of the Standish Group [7]

- b. **IMPACT:** In the article titled “14 Warning Signs That Your Team Is Nearing Dysfunction”, the Forbes Coaches Council listed Team Dysfunction and Cultural issues as a top reason for project failure. [8] Much of this was largely caused by Communication issues (Inadequate, Unclear, and Misinterpreted). A conflict-ridden team with much mutual distrust is highly unlikely to reach project goals.
- c. **RESOLUTION:** Strong, proactive leadership with clear, open communication, transparency and trust helps develop cohesive, achieving teams. Key factors in such leadership includes the willingness plus ability to determine and eliminate/minimize ill-effects of cultural differences.

The Australian website “PM Channel News”, interviewed several veteran Project Managers on cultural differences in Project Management:

*“Cultural differences in international project management are very important. A project manager who works aboard has to take these differences in consideration if he wants to succeed.” [9]*

This paper’s authors conducted an internet survey to gauge the opinions of Project & Program Managers on the importance of actively managing cultural differences. The survey received 51 responses in a week, from professionals in several countries. Results are in in Figure 2.

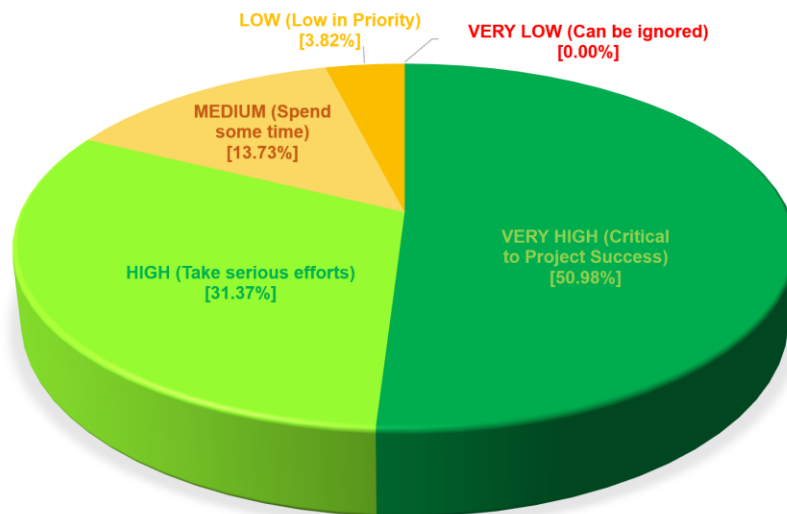


Figure 2: Responses to internet survey on the importance of proactively managing cultural differences in projects

Not surprisingly, over 82% of respondents were of the opinion that proactive management of cultural differences were of either CRITICAL or HIGH importance to Project Managers. Under 4% felt the importance was LOW or VERY LOW.

**S-I-R** established, we will now look at major aspects causing cultural issues.

### **Virtual Teams magnify probability of Cultural Clashes**

Virtual teams are a reality in almost all modern IT and Technology projects.

Bergiel, Bergiel & Balsmeier in the scholarly article, “The Reality of Virtual Teams” stressed on the ubiquity of people from across the world working together in projects:

*“Global virtual teams are not the exception but the rule as companies expand into the global market. Executives are constantly pressured to get their products and services to worldwide markets and to help they are turning to the best people regardless of their location, culture, or language and bringing them together as virtual teams.” [10]*

Effective motivation and leadership of team members from numerous continents, countries and therefore cultures are a very key ingredient in achieving project success.

**Can Project Managers hope that, somehow the team will magically meld together and work wonders? That would be a perfect example of living in “Fool’s Paradise”. As Vince Lombardi, legendary NFL player, coach and executive famously said, “Hope is not a Strategy!”**

## **Where is the Project Most at Risk?**

A majority of well-read and trained Project Managers are familiar with Tuckman's Model of Five Stages of Team Development.

Formulated in 1965 by Bruce Tuckman, it featured four major stages [11], namely:

- a. *Forming (Setting the Stage)***
- b. *Storming (Widespread Disagreements & Personality Conflicts)***
- c. *Norming (Resolving Conflicts & Tensions)***
- d. *Performing (Focus on common goals and achieving high levels of success)***

Later in 1977, perhaps as a reaction to the increased instance of projects, Tuckman added the final stage, "Adjourning", where the team disbands. The following diagram, attributed to Wikipedia, summarises these stages:

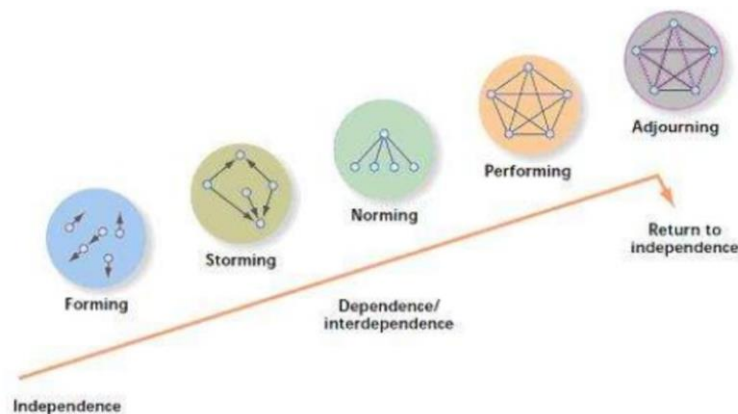


Figure 3: Tuckman's Stages of Team Development

Ideally speaking, the Project Manager should put in substantial planning for managing multicultural teams as part of the "Identify Stakeholders" process in Project Stakeholder Management, introduced as a new knowledge area in PMI's PMBOK Guide version 5. [12]

If enough planning was not carried out at the Initiation stages, the highest people and cultural risks to the project abound at the stage of team Formation and Storming. Much of project success, therefore, will depend on investing considerable time and energy at these stages.

## **Common Sources of Cultural Clashes**

Most human beings hate change, preferring to stay within their comfort circles. However, projects are all about bringing about change.

"We would rather be unique than equal", is the title of a chapter in Devdutt Pattanaik's "The Leadership Sutra - an Indian Approach to Power" [13]. However, it is well-known that too much uniqueness and diversity can also cause serious cultural differences.

Cultural problems can range from miscommunication to actual conflict, all endangering effective worker productivity and performance. [14]

Commonly accepted sources of cultural clashes in project teams are:

- **Communication styles and verbiage**
- **Attitudes to Team-building & Team Bonding**
- **Perception of Time**
- **Religious and Political Views/Beliefs**

### **What are some typical Cultural Traits that can impact project teams?**

We will focus on well-established, geographically-based cultural traits from four continents where the presenters achieved significant project leadership success.

**Extreme care will be taken to avoid cultural stereotyping.** For, while it is OK to generalise, it is very dangerous, even culturally insensitive, to stereotype.

But what is the difference between Generalisation and Stereotyping?

The Australian Multicultural Foundation, in a well-researched Training Manual [15] provide the following examples. We quote:

<b>Generalisation (Acceptable)</b>	<b>Stereotyping (Unacceptable)</b>
Western' societies tend to be individualistic	Australians are selfish
Germans tend to value efficiency and formality	Germans are uptight
U.S. Americans readily praise personal achievement	Americans are show-offs
Japanese society values discretion and politeness.	Japanese never say what they really think

Figure 4: Examples of Cultural Generalisation versus Stereotyping

### **Common Cultural Traits Across Four Continents**

We will share the following typical cultural traits with session attendees. To further enrich the session, we will invite a few session attendees to share patterns and cultural traits they experienced in projects, ideally in continents beyond the four that we will present on.



Space constraints do not permit deep diving into details. We therefore present short summaries of a few cultural traits that will be covered.

A key caveat is that these strategies are not broad “brush strokes”. Rather, they will need to be carefully tailored, considering compositions of specific teams.

Cultural traits in various continents	
South Asia: India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh & Afghanistan	Rest of Asia, countries in the Middle East
High respect and deference for age and job title.	Professional and personal aspects are not separated into water-tight silos.
Reluctance to easily say “No” to project assignments.	Doing business involves high importance to personal relationships, family ties, trust, and honor.
Societal respect for intellectual property & ethics is at far lower levels than many western societies.	Strict dress codes exist in several areas.

Figure 5: Common cultural traits among countries in Asia

Cultural traits in various continents	
Europe	North America
High importance accorded to punctuality	Brutally honest in feedback
Considerably more formal in official matters compared to team members from the US	Strict laws preventing discrimination based on age, marital status, religious beliefs, etc.
Very proud of the national/local language	Far lower levels of formality in professional situations

Figure 6: Common cultural traits among countries in Europe & North America

Cultural traits in various continents
South America
Much importance to collectivism (respect for personal & interpersonal relationships in the group)
Body language & non-verbal communication is given equal, if not more importance than traditional verbal communication
High levels of sense of humour, including self-deprecatory humour

Figure 7: Common cultural traits among countries in South America

The following are some additional cultural differences that Project/Program Managers should pay special attention to:

**Communication:** How do people communicate bad news? Team members from some Asian cultures are reluctant to give supervisors bad news – while those from other cultures may exaggerate it. Similarly methods of reading and writing can cause serious communication issues.

An excellent example is the famous advertising case study of a well-known Consumer Goods major marketing detergents across continents. A hugely effective North American advertising campaign, based on simple visuals, failed miserably when used in the United Arab Emirates. Here was the visual:

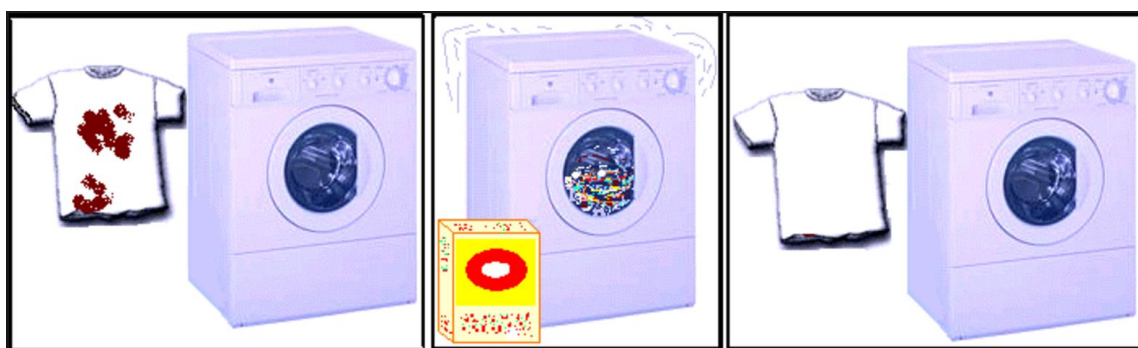


Figure 8: Advertising campaign for a popular Detergent brand that failed disastrously in the United Arab Emirates

Similar is the case of American beer maker Coors that confidently took its very successful US "Turn It Loose" campaign to Spain. When executives didn't pay enough attention to translation into Spanish, a tagline used was commonly interpreted as "Suffer from diarrhea!" Needless to say, the brand suffered irreparable damage! [16]

**Body Language & Gestures:** Countries the world over feature gestures that can be considered extremely confusing to those from other continents. AsWeTravel.com has a very interesting list of "5 Confusing Gestures from Across the World" [17]. These include the Indian "Yes, No, Maybe" shake, "Ne" in Greece meaning "Yes", the "Head Toss" & "Tongue Click" in the Balkans, the "Bent Finger" in Hungary and the famous Bulgarian "Head Nod".

Similarly, most organisations doing business globally regularly publish well-researched guides for their employees. For example, Infosys, the Indian IT multinational has published a detailed guide on Indian culture for its overseas employees & visitors. [18]

**Team-building:** Some cultures, as in the US, are highly individualistic, with people wanting to go it alone. Other cultures value cooperation within or among teams. Team-building issues can become increasingly problematic as teams are comprised of people from a mix of these cultural types.

## **Probable negative impacts and welcome positive outcomes of each key factor**

A famous Tamil adage advises: “Don’t cook eggplant dishes with printed pictures of the vegetable”, translated into “Theory is great, but practice is KING!” To ensure practical takeaways from our presentation, key dysfunction factors will be introduced as actual situations in real projects.

Figures 9 & 10 indicate recommended strategies to a few of the cultural traits detailed in Figures 5 to 7. However, it is important to stress that these will need to be fine-tuned to the needs of specific teams.

Positive Cultural Aspects	Continent	Strategy to leverage
High respect and deference for age and job title.	South Asia	In India, being a Manager is highly valued. Leadership can use aspirational trait to motivate team members.
High importance accorded to punctuality	Europe	Punctuality helps the entire team. Time-conscious behavior of team members from some cultures can be used as an example for others in the team
Most Europeans are considerably more formal in official matters compared to team members from the US	Europe	Conduct team building exercises to help team members gel better. The resultant improved chemistry can help reduce levels of formality.
Laws against discrimination based on age, marital status, religious beliefs, etc.	North America	These laws can be used as examples of Fairness even with team members from countries where such laws do not exist.
Body language & non-verbal communications given equal, if not more importance than traditional verbal forms	South America	Gesturing conveys confidence, enthusiasm and energy to your audience. These are traits that other team members can learn & leverage.

Figure 9: Techniques to leverage positive cultural traits of team members from various regions

Negative Cultural Aspects	Continent	Strategy to Avoid / Manage
Reluctance to easily say "No" to project assignments.	South Asia	During the team meetings & trainings, make the team understand that 1. "It's okay to say No" when your plate is already full. 2. It is okay to break the bad news when you need to rather than not opening the bad news at all.
Societal respect for intellectual property & ethics is at far lower levels than many western societies.	South Asia	Team building exercises to highlight the advantages of ethical behavior, the pride it gives. The fear due to unethical behavior can also be emphasized in these team building exercises.
Professional and personal aspects are not separated into water-tight silos.	Rest of Asia	Need to provide soft skill training on how to do work-life balance, Say No when you need to and establishing boundaries within colleagues.
Very proud of the national/local language	Europe	Have a casual meet of the team every month, where every team member proudly talks about their country / language so that the team understands other cultures and traditions. This will make the team member respect others' cultures and other team members too.
Brutally honest in feedback	North America	Training sessions focusing on the best ways of providing positive / negative feedback. In the case of negative feedback, they need to be trained on methods of providing them in a constructive manner.
Far lower levels of formality in professional situations	North America	People need to understand "Work while you work, play while you play". Have informal ice-breakers and even interesting virtual games/quizzes to improve team chemistry.

Figure 10: Techniques to leverage negative cultural traits of team members from various regions

Time will be set aside in the session for up to three attendees to briefly mention cultural patterns they have experienced on their own projects and solutions they implemented.

A very relevant and powerful quotation by the legendary and inspirational American Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King reads:

*"People don't get along because they fear each other. People fear each other because they don't know each other. They don't know each other because they have not properly communicated with each other."*

**Dr Martin Luther King, 1929-1968**



## **The SIX STEP PROCESS**

A very effective SIX STEP process for Project & Program Managers to effectively leverage diverse traits in their teams includes the following. This list has been prepared using the lessons learned by this paper's authors, as well as a well-respected process by Robert Bean Consulting, [www.robertbeanconsulting.com.au/](http://www.robertbeanconsulting.com.au/)

- a. List the various regions/nationalities forming your project team
- b. Analyse positive, negative and neutral traits, ensuring that no stereotyping takes place
- c. Even within similar regions, there could be crucial sub-cultures that could play an important role. For example, working environments in the US North East (such as the Tristate areas of New York, New Jersey & Connecticut) are for more formal and stressful compared to workplaces in the US South West, such as California.

Similarly, citizens of large countries in a neighbourhood could be looked on with suspicion as bullies by people from smaller neighbourhood counties (say USA & Mexico). Shashi Tharoor, in "Pax Indica" details the situation in South Asia wherein India and Indians are rather mistakenly considered "bullies" by citizens of smaller neighbouring countries:

*"India is the proverbial 298-pound gorilla on the beach, whose slightest step will immediately be seen by the skinny 98-pounders as proof of insensitivity, bullying or worse." [19]*

- d. Design specific cultural sensitivity and communication styles training that serves the dual purpose of avoiding cultural clashes and leveraging strengths across cultures.  
A very useful technique we personally used is Role Play. For example, an Indian team member could provide brutally frank feedback to a US counterpart, therefore enhancing empathy.
- e. Set clear ground rules on ethical and professional conduct, including the four pillars of PMI's Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility [20]: Responsibility, Respect, Fairness & Honesty
- f. Design and execute effective Team-building activities that foster understanding of various cultures and individuals in the team

All these steps should be built on a culture of complete openness and transparency.

For, as the Dalai Lama once famously stated, "A lack of transparency results in distrust and a deep sense of insecurity" [21]

## CONCLUSION

It is a matter of deep concern for India that her prestigious global leadership in the Information Technology industry, a shining example of India's growth for long, is now under severe threat.

Widespread lay-offs in the Indian IT sector are causing much anxiety and pain.

Among the paths open to India, one very viable road to success is venturing into new geographies that have hitherto been unexploited due to the attractive "low hanging fruit" markets of the US and Europe. Venturing into such areas will need increased understanding of cultural sensitivities across various geographies.

As previously mentioned, hope is no strategy at all when dealing with virtual teams representing various age groups, geographies, cultures, religions, and beliefs.

This paper has covered a lot of ground on the Situation, Adverse Impact and Resolution (S-I-R) with regard to effectively handling cultural diversity on modern projects.

Leveraging our actual practical Leadership Lessons across four continents amply demonstrates the originality of the paper, its applicability and scalability.

If selected, we will further leverage effectiveness of these by ensuring effective and frequent exchange of ideas with the audience.

It is our fervent hope that India's leaders will leverage these and several other factors to keep our nation at her rightful perch on top of the Global IT Leadership.

Together we can, and together, we will.

Jai Hind!

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