Theme:

Project Management Leadership - Harmony in Diversity & Millennial Generation

Title of the Paper:

Team Dynamics in the otherwise Dynamic Project Lifecycle

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Contents

Project Management National Conference, India
Project Management - *Powering India's Global Leadership*
15-17 September, 2017, Chennai

HOSTED BY PMI CHENNAI CHAPTER | CO-HOSTED BY PMI

Keywords

Diversity, Cultural, Generational, Collaboration, Harmony, Millennials, Multi-cultural, Quality framework

Abstract

If only "One Size fits all" could be true, life of a project manager would have been so straightforward. "The recipe of being a good Project Manager would have been a list of Do's and Don'ts and every Project manager in every situation with every individual has to abide by certain rules and regulations, followed which, all projects would have been successfully executed." - This is just an unreal thought and is obviously far away from the actual reality linked to the dynamics that is observed in the project teams. Here I am not only talking about the dynamics of the changing requirements or demands of the customer, but here I am primarily referring to the challenges which are due to differences in the way every individual in the team is, based on gender or age or generation X, Y, Z.

While the customer is always the center of focus, if adequate attention is not paid towards the individuality of every member, this can result into a disastrous situation. Right balance in the team is of utmost importance for an organization to grow. Project Manager needs to know what are the needs and strengths of every individual and adapt his or her leadership style to get the best out of his/her team.

In this paper, author intends to present some ideas that she thinks would work best in order to build harmony and increase throughput of the team.

Intent

Author would restrict the team dynamics to mainly cultural and generational diversity amalgamated in a common framework called **Multi-CultGen** Diversity Framework and would like to present some ideas of how Multi-CultGen Diversity can be promoted. This will help the readers in implementing some of the ideas in their teams/organization in order to get the larger benefit. "Team" in context is a team comprising of members belonging to different age groups working from three different countries (*Names not disclosed for confidentiality purpose*), which work together as "One Team" for customer projects.

Multi-CultGen Diversity Framework– A Closer Look

Where there is a will, there is a way! Does it hold true still? Well, this age-old saying is valid and will remain valid till the world exists but truly speaking this stands best for the story of "The Thirsty Crow".

In today's corporate world, the biggest question is whether all crows will really work the same way to sip water from the pot. Or would they adopt smarter methods to get the water from the pot. This is exactly the power that is generated when people from

Figure 1: Multi-CultGen Diversity Framework

different generations, cultures, ideas, values come together to work. Each one brings the best from their world and trick is to respect their uniqueness and be able to capitalize on the same for the benefit of the organization. Moreover, this is also a need of the hour because geographically dispersed teams can offer the best functional expertise from around the world and Multi-generational members bring the best from the varied experience level with different perspectives on strategic and organizational challenges to compete in the current business environment.
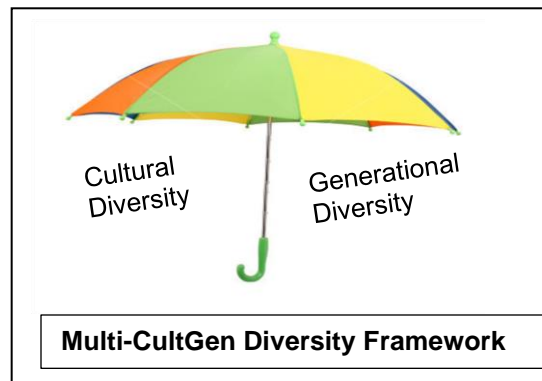
First, let us go back to basics of what diversity is – be it in culture or generation.

Cultural Diversity

Cultural Diversity comes when there is a difference in ethnicity, religion, nationality, language between the members of the same team. These differences can bring strength to the team if the dynamics of differences is taken care. As you go further down the paper, you will find out what it takes to make cultural diversity a strength.

Generational Diversity

The term Generational Diversity sounds strange because we never imagine or think about this aspect at work. We are too used to hear terms like "generation gap" which typically exists between generation of Grandparents, Parents and Children. How as a Project Manager am I supposed to take care of generation gap at work? This is indeed an interesting concept and before we get into what is it, let us first understand the basic terminology to understand this concept. A generation is a group of people in the same age boundary (range of years). It is believed that people who belong to same generation are somewhat alike in terms of their preferences, way of working, attitude towards life, values built in them and similarity in their opinions. This is obvious because all the above factors largely depend on the environment in which one is raised. If the external environment is same, then people in that era are bound to have similar exposure and they are bound to be somewhat alike in their behavior and mannerism. This essentially, provides the

demarcation between people who are born in different times and this is where the generational diversity concept emerges from.

Table 1 shows the categories differentiated based on the years of experience but there is no hard and fast rule about the age/experience boundaries mentioned below (This is author's interpretation).

Category	Work Experience (Yrs.)
Older Employees	'> 20
Mid-Career Employees	10-20
Young Employees	< 10

Table 1: For the sake of comparison, author would club Older and Mid-Career Employees and call them as "Generation Xers" and Young Employees as "Millennial-Professionals of current era, MPECs" (*because they are born closer to 2K*)!

Generation Xers are also typically referred to as Mature Generation people! If we analyze Generation Xers human beings, the key values Table 1: Experience-Based Categories rotate around dedication, values, hard work, stability, loyalty, adherence to rules, respect for hierarchy, pleasure over reward etc. Whereas MPECs are known for their high energy (obviously, it comes from the fact that they are the younger population of the lots), have high confidence, are street smart, their love for being a social animal, quantifying achievement, optimism, quick results etc.

Now, if we closely look at the difference in characteristics between Generation Xers and MPECs, differences seem to be interesting but does it mean anything at workplace? The answer is "Yes" and more important questions that arise are "Why" and "How to deal with this".

"Why" because key values drive behavior of an individual day to day and when people with different behavioral characteristics work together for a common objective, difference of opinion will crop in, conflicts are likely to erupt, which can have a negative effect on the morale of the individuals, leading to hampering the productivity and motivation of an individual. Hence, the whole story boils down to how to handle this at the workplace?

Multi-CultGen Diversity Framework introduced in this paper is essentially a blend of both the cultural and generational aspects and how these aspects can be embraced together to make the members of a team work towards a common objective, overcoming any sort of differences because of the cultural or generational diversity issues in the project ecosystem.

Multi-CultGen Diversity Framework – A Case Study

Multi-Cultural and Multi-Generation is what we experienced in our establishment wherein we have group of people (Multiple age boundaries) working for the set of project(s) but have varying experience in this domain with cultural differences in terms of different regions (three different countries) to which they hail from. The below case study reflects some of the challenges that we faced and the countermeasures that enabled us to construct a positive work environment and build higher harmonization in the team.

Challenges and Counter Measures for a Multi-CultGen Workforce

Figure 2 depicts the Multi-CultGen Diversity framework that we have established in our organization and the key aspects at which it is aimed at.

Four major challenges that were being addressed through this framework are:

1. Knowing Each Other
2. Communication (Open and transparent)
3. Collaborative Mindset
4. Quality Framework

Below paragraphs describe how each one of these challenges were overcome by means of various actions/counter measures

Challenge 1: Knowing Each other

One basic challenge in the Multi-CultGen team Vs team at one region (with similar age group of people) is the "**Social-distance**". Whereas, Social-distance is lesser in the latter case, in the former case, it can be a big bottleneck. Reducing "Social-distance" thereby increasing emotional connect, becomes the primary challenge for the Project Manager.

Figure 2: Multi-CultGen Diversity Framework: Main Components

As a Project Manager, being able to win trust of the team members and gain their confidence in your leadership style is vital to the success of project(s).

If members are able to connect with what is happening inside the project organization, they will be motivated to give their best performance. Absence of trust will have negative consequences. Trust can only be built if there is a personal connect with people.
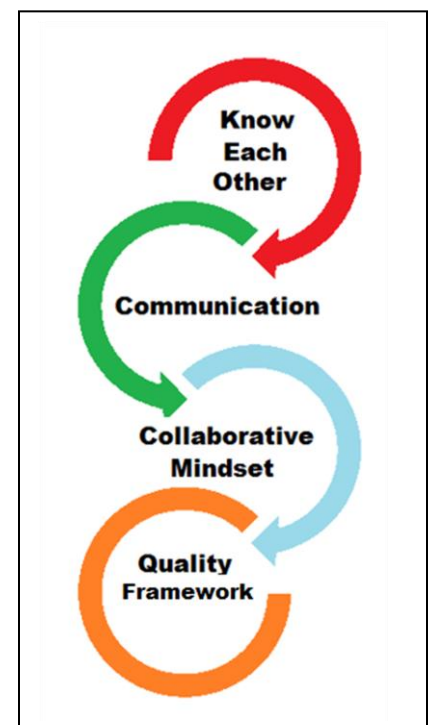
We fostered the culture of knowing each other by means of:

1) Orientation Visits: Exchanging people across locations through short term assignments. This helps an individual to observe the culture and behavior closely and reduces the interpersonal gap when in future people are connecting through tele-conferences. These visits also help people to learn about different cultures, mannerisms, food habits, learn about each other's festivals etc. This is an investment but guarantees an assured return on investment.

Figure 3: Common Goals

2) Reducing the Social-distance by means of giving a short phone call on thanking an individual for support or appreciation. Similarly, texting a person on their special days like Birthdays or festivals (MPEC's survive on this!).

3) Factoring extra two minutes for light conversations before getting into formal meetings to take the lead in initiating informal discussions about non work matters that allow individuals to get to know their distant counterparts (e.g., Weather discussions – Believe me none is genuinely interested in knowing the temperature of distant place unless you are catching your next flight to that place! But it's a way to show that you are interested in their living conditions).

4) Trainings are arranged (with the help of training department) in each region which makes the individuals aware of cultures of other regions plays a vital role. This is further enhanced by making it a mandatory check before travel to improve the Inter-cultural sensitivity.

5) Setting up a common goal framework so that people across regions and ages understand that together they can win or together they can fail. This gives the sense of ownership amongst different individuals. Regular communication of the quantitative parameters about what we have achieved together as per the set goals brings people together on a common table.
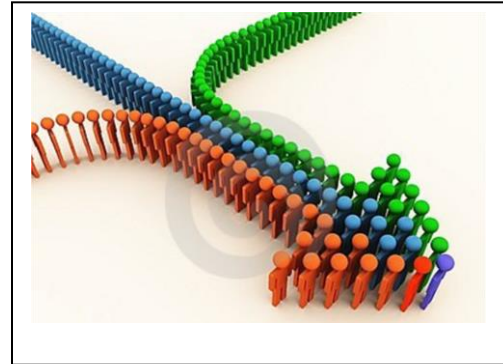
Challenge 2: Open and transparent Communication

Effective Communication goes beyond the usage of structural knowledge of the language but must include social and cultural elements. Most part of the communication is about the body language, tone and pitch. Working in Multi-CultGen teams not only means that there are MPEC's, Generation Xers, but also people working in different countries and in different time zones. Communication styles differ from culture to culture, age to age, moreover, notions of authority and hierarchy are understood differently. If communication aspects are not taken care, this can lead to higher potential for misunderstandings and hard feelings for each other. Key is to be mindful of the differences as our strength lies in our differences than similarities.

Manager needs to make adjustments and adaptations to his or her communication style in order to take care of these fine differences.

Steps that help us to have a common ground of communication is:

1) Setup various modes of communication – Do not restrict only to formal e-mails when it comes to communicating any information to the team. Adopt a mixed strategy, choosing between formal e-mails, Face to face discussions, Video conferences, instant messaging (for MPECs specially), coffee-chats, Skype Video calls etc. Important is to keep a check of whether the information is assimilated well and understood appropriately by different individuals.

2) Restricting to the usage of common language, "English" during tele conferences and not using any abbreviations which may not be understandable to all participants. If at all, private discussions have to happen, then, making it a practice of putting the phone on "Mute" and taking the time off by usage of polite words like "Excuse us for 5 minutes, sorry for discussion in X language".

3) Approach towards questioning the speaker needs to be modified. While MPEC's believe in the idea of "Instant Maggi Noodles", culturally, it may not be acceptable. The basic awareness of simple principles like not interrupting while the speaker is explaining helps people inculcate the habit of active listening and understanding other's point of view. This gives an important message that everyone's point of view is important and should be listened to, barring the differences of age, hierarchy, region etc. Basically, awareness grew about the difference between hearing and listening.

4) Emphasized on the importance of documenting the minutes of meeting helped Multi-CultGen workforce to have a common understanding of any discussion, which is useful for future reference (if required).

Challenge 3: Building a Collaborative Mindset

Figure 4 Collaboration

As people from different cultural groups and experience level work together, views are likely to conflict. When we don't understand each other, we sometimes react in ways that make a relationship ineffective. Often we're not aware that cultural* or age differences are the root of miscommunication. Collaboration is the way of empowering every member on board, believing in the strengths of each member.

* cultural difference could also mean even difference in accent or pronunciation of English words

Steps that help us to build collaboration in a Multi-CultGen workforce are:

1) In order to have a healthy collaboration, it becomes necessary to involve and make everyone participate by giving space and ears to the ideas of every individual. Welcome the beginner's mindset and allow to see the problem through fresh eyes. "None of the questions are silly and none of the ideas are foolish" is what we believe in. We allow open but healthy argument and give value to disagreement before concluding.

2) In order to make the team work for a common cause, we set 50% of the goals as "Collaborative Goals" and rest 50% as the "Personal Goals". In the beginning it is indeed difficult to make the members understand this concept of "Working together yet Working apart"! With consecutive two years of following this method, team(s) understand the power of working together. Rather than pushing the problems in each other's court with arguments like this is not a requirement defects but an implementation defect, focus is now on "how to prevent similar defects in future than on "who" is the cause for defect(s)!"

Challenge 4: Quality Framework

Quality is no longer an advantage in this competitive world, but it's a necessity in the work product. Quality issues result in wastage across the complete development cycle. Also, Quality cannot be built after making a product (it would be more like laying down the foundation after the building is made!). Now, when the product is built by a team having a Multi-CultGen workforce, the challenge becomes double folded and it becomes more important to do the development more efficiently so that the Quality is built right from the beginning. This was established by setting up a common "Quality Framework (Q-FW)" across regions and teams. Moreover, representatives from every region and role participated in series of workshops to come up with this Q-FW and this was rolled out using the below (Figure 5) sequence of steps:
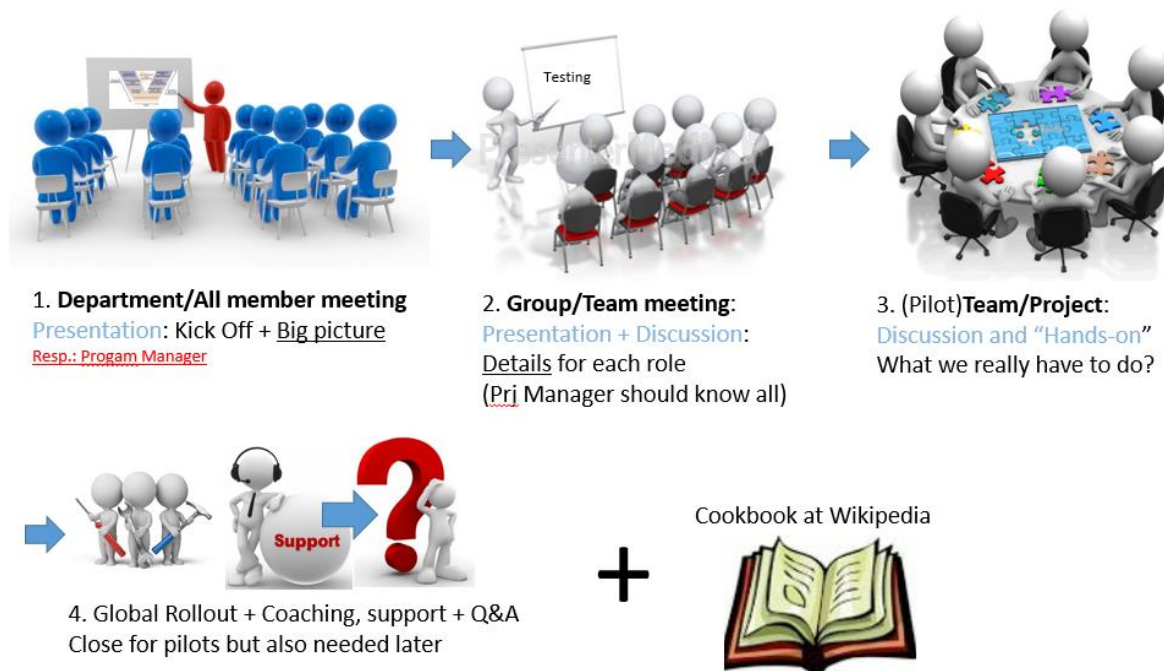
Figure 5: Quality-Framework (Q-FW) Rollout

Salient features of Q-FW are:

1) Uniform framework for all project team(s), irrespective of the region.

2) Measurement of the defined parameters is done on monthly basis using a PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) at every region in every project team. These data points are then analyzed with Central Quality team to see the improvement points and corrective/preventive steps.

3) Performing Joint Reviews between experts from different regions for the review of relevant work product.

4) Performing Joint Testing across members belonging to different regions.

5) Lessons learnt from the Quality issues are discussed centrally with all the teams in order to penetrate the lessons learnt into every team.

6) Defect Injection Rate (DIR) is measured globally as One single factor as a ratio of all the defects to the number of all the requirements (including defects). DIR is also defined as a collaborative goal across Multi-CultGen team(s) so that everyone chases the target with equal force and conviction

These steps help to build a collaborative atmosphere in the teams and work towards a common target.

Benefits to the Organization

Benefits that we have witnessed after the implementation of the measures described so far are mainly categorized in two buckets:

1) Strengths of Multi-CultGen team
2) Quantitative Benefits

Strengths of Multi-CultGen Team

The difference in the team(s) led to strengthening the overall Project team structure. While one region has the expertise know-how of the system (due to large number of Generation Xers in the team), the other region had expertise and Agile methods of Implementation (coming from MPECs). For the customers, team is available covering most portion of 24 hrs. due to difference in the time-zones. When Multi-CultGen team started working cohesively, this became a huge advantage for customer(s) as increased cohesiveness within the team also led to improved efficiency and better productivity.

Quantitative Benefits

Benefits of employing the counter-measures described in the above section were measured at the beginning of the year by using a mutual survey performed simultaneously across three different countries. Here is the snapshot of the results from the same (Kindly note that numbers indicated in the snapshot below are changed and also the name of three countries are erased from the picture because of the confidentiality of the data in the organization) –
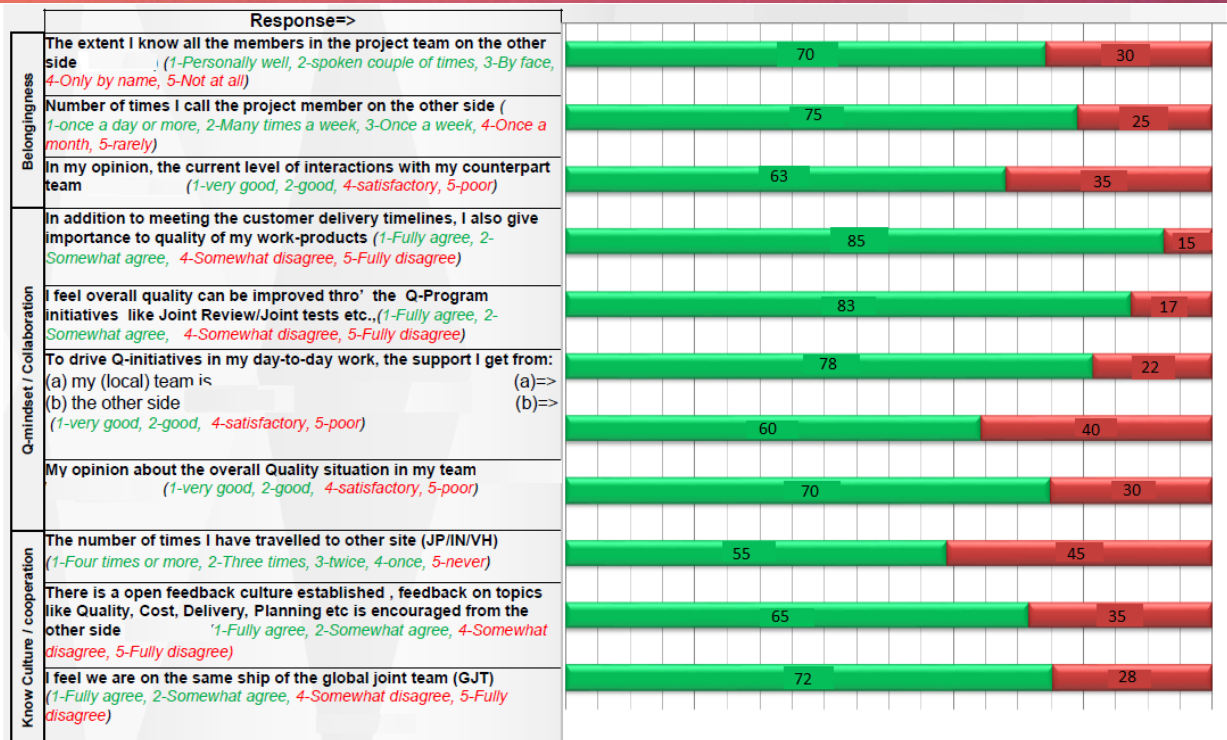
Response=>	
Belongingness	The extent I know all the members in the project team on the other side (1-Personally well, 2-spoken couple of times, 3-By face, 4-Only by name, 5-Not at all)
	Number of times I call the project member on the other side (1-once a day or more, 2-Many times a week, 3-Once a week, 4-Once a month, 5-rarely)
	In my opinion, the current level of interactions with my counterpart team (1-very good, 2-good, 4-satisfactory, 5-poor)
Q-mindset / Collaboration	In addition to meeting the customer delivery timelines, I also give importance to quality of my work-products (1-Fully agree, 2-Somewhat agree, 4-Somewhat disagree, 5-Fully disagree)
	I feel overall quality can be improved thro' the Q-Program initiatives like Joint Review/Joint tests etc.,(1-Fully agree, 2-Somewhat agree, 4-Somewhat disagree, 5-Fully disagree)
	To drive Q-initiatives in my day-to-day work, the support I get from: (a) my (local) team is (a)=> (b) the other side (b)=> (1-very good, 2-good, 4-satisfactory, 5-poor)
	My opinion about the overall Quality situation in my team (1-very good, 2-good, 4-satisfactory, 5-poor)
Know Culture / cooperation	The number of times I have travelled to other site (JP/IN/VH) (1-Four times or more, 2-Three times, 3-twice, 4-once, 5-never)
	There is a open feedback culture established , feedback on topics like Quality, Cost, Delivery, Planning etc is encouraged from the other side '1-Fully agree, 2-Somewhat agree, 4-Somewhat disagree, 5-Fully disagree)
	I feel we are on the same ship of the global joint team (GJT) (1-Fully agree, 2-Somewhat agree, 4-Somewhat disagree, 5-Fully disagree)

Values: 70/30, 75/25, 63/35, 85/15, 83/17, 78/22, 60/40, 70/30, 55/45, 65/35, 72/28

Figure 6: Mutual Servey Results Year 201Y (Values modified, names of the countries erased, confidentiality reaons)

The survey results depict that there is an increased level of co-operation and collaboration across 3 regions when compared to the previous year's mutual survey's results [Year 201(Y-1) & Year 201Y]

Highlights of the differences are –

Compared to previous year, overall average of 40% increase in participation rate was seen from all 3 regions

Other Salient differences are:

1. Interactions between the Multi-CultGen teams across regions show very good improvement
2. Also the support from other regions for driving overall Q-FW has seen improvement
3. Feeling at customer facing location is that the overall Quality situation in the team has improved in a big way. Hence, 'Perception Gap' between regions about overall quality situation saw a decrease. (15% improvement in Quality of deliverables, reduced customer complaints)
4. Big decrease in the number of Orientation travels to other regions as individuals were comfortable connecting through Video/audio conferences (30% reduction leading to significant cost saving)
5. Feeling across regions was also that open feedback culture has improved

This survey showed that the counter-measures in place are working as a useful instrument in binding multi-cultural and multi-generational teams and hence, continuation of the same is very important for the continued growth of the organization.

Conclusion

In this highly competitive, dynamic, customer-driven market for Quality products and services, there is a strong need to connect between members with varied skills, without limiting ourselves to cultural, generational and languages barriers. While it is not easy to break these barriers but it is also clear that without virtual connects between different teams, it is impossible to meet the demands of customers. Global mindset is needed for the leaders, project managers, and employees to overcome these challenges. Various means of job rotations across regions, inter cultural sensitivity trainings, language competence are needed to meet the dynamic needs of the customers. If effectively managed, Diverse teams amplify the benefit of teamwork and are able to produce more efficiently, with better innovation techniques and yet at a lower cost. People from different backgrounds and age brackets bring their own unique qualities and are able to handle the challenging situations in a much better manner. To conclude "An organization's success and competitiveness depends upon its ability to embrace diversity and realize the benefits."

References

The paper is from the real working experience of the author and methods used in different project situations in the organization at which author is working at.

Some of the base pictures are taken from websites as:

[1] Figure 1: Multi-CultGen Framework: Image taken from shutterstock.com

[2] Figure 3: Common Goals – Image taken from dreamstime.com

[3] Figure 4: Collaboration: Image taken from shutterstock.com

[4] Figure 5: Quality-Framework (Q-FW) Rollout: Image taken from shutterstock.com

[5] Figure 6: Mutual Servey Results Year 201Y is taken from the real survey done by the Quality organization. However, in Figure 6, actual values are altered for the sake of confidentiality.