WHEN WEST MEETS EAST: The Cultural Challenges of Offshore Project Management

by Craig Storti

This paper will examine the most common cultural challenges affecting interactions between Western companies and their Indian partners. We will list the five most common complaints (from Western clients), explain the cultural differences at the heart of each complaint, and suggest strategies that Westerners and Indians can use going forward to avoid these cultural challenges.

1. In this paper the term "Westerners" refers to Northern Americans and Northern Europeans.

Five Challenges

The five most common challenges Westerners cite are:

1. Indians don't tell us when they're falling behind schedule/will not be able to meet a deadline.

2. Indians don't tell us if they think something we propose will not work or if they know a better way of doing it. We can't get them to offer a different point of view.

3. Indians don't ask questions or for clarification if they don't understand something we've explained to them.

4. Indians don't like to take ownership or accept responsibility when we delegate something to them.

5. Indians over-commit; they promise more than they can deliver.

In one form or another, these cultural complaints explain, at least in part, many of the standard client frustrations regarding offshore project management, such as:

- Unrealized/smaller than expected cost savings
- More time managing the relationship than the client can afford
- Unsuccessful/slower than expected knowledge transfer
- Delayed ramping up of engagements
- Delayed hand-off of work
- Production delays
- Missed deadlines
- Work that has to be redone
- Backlash against offshoring ("We told you so") among the client's employees

We should note here at the outset that these five cultural challenges obviously reflect the perspective of Westerners; indeed, the language of these five observations is lifted verbatim from a survey of American employees of a large US global company in which participants were asked what were their biggest challenges working with colleagues in India. In each case, when these criticisms were presented to the Indian counterparts, they vigorously denied all of them!

And rightly so—because all of these observations are matters of perception, and culture deeply influences perception. As we will see in this paper, individuals from two different cultures often interpret the same behavior very differently, and yet both would be correct. When an American says "Indians don't tell us when they're falling behind" and Indians insist they do, there is a very good chance the two speakers are interpreting certain key behaviors very differently. As we will see, this phenomenon of misinterpretation is at the heart of nearly all the cultural problems that plague most East-West offshore partnerships.

The following pages contain the observations of Mr. Craig Storti on how work culture differences and misinterpretations lead to larger issues. The views and the solutions he suggests are supported by PMI India's Excellence Enabler's Forum (EEF)

About PMI Excellence Enabler's Forum (EEF)

PMI India took the lead in 2013 to form an industry forum, the Excellence Enabler's Forum (EEF), of senior professionals invited from various organizations in India who are keen to leverage project management for business results.

Currently 32 organizations from IT services, products, the public sector, and infrastructure are part of this forum. The team comprises of project managers, program managers, senior project managers, general managers, delivery heads, and senior directors from organizations such as Infosys, TCS, ITC Infotech, Syntel, Thomson Reuters, Wipro, IBM India, SAP, HCL, Intel, Deloitte, Unisys, and Cisco Systems.

EEF also serves as a platform for thought leadership to enhance project management maturity and build a project, program, and portfolio management networking group.

EEF has industry specific focus groups for IT services and products to identify major challenges related to project and program management.

Let's go back and relook at the five core issues that were identified and try to arrive at solutions.

1. Indians Don't Tell Us When They're Falling Behind

Indians themselves often joke about IST or Indian Stretchable Time, suggesting they have a more relaxed and forgiving attitude towards time and deadlines. But in my experience Indians are just as sensitive about deadlines as Westerners are. So how do we explain this complaint, then? Let's look at an example.

CARL   :   Well, I think that's everything, Indira. Thanks for staying late over there.

INDIRA   :   You're welcome, Carl. I was just wondering, before you go, about the completion date on that accounting test.

CARL   :   Sure. I think that was in an email I sent you. Let me check my sent mail.

INDIRA   :   I believe you mentioned the end of May.

CARL   :   Here it is. Right, the end of May.

INDIRA   :   I see. That's still good for you, I guess?

CARL   :   Yes. It's fine.

INDIRA   :   Anyway, we'll have updates every week, right?

CARL   :   If you'd like.

INDIRA   :   That might be a good idea.

It is fair to say that Carl leaves this conversation thinking Indira is going to be ready at the end of May, and Indira leaves it quite sure Carl understands she's going to have a hard time meeting that deadline. Both people heard the exact same words, the same comments, but each attached their own culture's meaning to the phrase and did not realize there was a significant difference.

In American culture (let's make Carl an American), "I was just wondering," "That's still good for you, I guess" and "We'll have updates every week" are interpreted literally. "I was just wondering" means maybe Indira forgot the date and needs to be reminded. "That's still good for you, I guess?" is a question, asking Carl if that date is still acceptable. And "We'll have updates every week" means just that: Indira will update Carl every week on her progress.

Now let's consider what these three statements might mean in Indira's culture. "I was just wondering" may be Indira's way of bringing up for reconsideration a date she and Carl had discussed earlier as a way of indicating a possible problem with the date. In other words, it may not be that Indira has forgotten the date (indeed, we learn later she has not when she says "I believe you mentioned the end of May") but rather that she'd like to discuss a new date. "That's still good for you, I guess?" might not be a question to Carl but a polite way of saying the date is not right for her. And "We'll have updates every week" might be Indira's way of telling Carl that she'll be informing him every week that she is falling behind and very soon he will offer a new deadline.

This is what we meant earlier when we said that people from different cultures sometimes perceive the same behavior very differently. Carl perceives "I was just wondering" to mean "remind me", and Indira perceives it to mean "can we please discuss a new date?" And both parties, of course, naturally assume the other party has understood the behavior in the way it was intended.

The point for our purposes here is to suggest that when Westerners say "Indians don't tell us when they're falling behind," it's entirely possible that Indians do tell Westerners, but that the way they tell them—just like the way Indira told Carl—is misinterpreted. This would explain, of course, why Indians often dispute this characterization. If you asked Indira why she didn't notify Carl she was falling behind, her response might very well be "What part of that conversation did that man not understand?"

Strategy

Westerners should encourage the Indiras of the world to be more direct when communicating they are falling behind. Tell Indira it's not enough (in your culture) to say "I was just wondering" or "Is that good for you?" And then give her some language to use (Can we discuss a new deadline? What are the chances we can move back the deadline? I'm afraid we need more time.)

For their part, Indians should not hesitate to be "frank" with Carl. Indians can be very outspoken, very direct with their peers, and even if Carl is not Indira's peer, she needs to talk to him the way she would talk to one of her peers. And Carl needs to reassure Indira that that level of directness with a superior is entirely appropriate in Western cultures.

2. Indians Don't Tell Us If They Think Something We Propose Will Not Work Or If They Know A Better Way

Needless to say this complaint is very frustrating for both sides. Indians want to provide the best service and level of expertise possible, and Westerners are looking for just this kind of value when they reach out to Indian resources. Once again, while the complaint is quite common from Westerners, the response from Indians is "Of course we tell them when their idea is lacking or if we know a better way." It seems safe to say that a big part of the problem is cultural misinterpretation.

Let's listen to Bill and Sumitra:

BILL : So what did you think of that solution
         I emailed you about last week?

SUMITRA : Last week?

BILL : You know, my suggestion for how to redesign
         that platform?

SUMITRA : Oh, yes. I remember. Yes, we got that one.

BILL : And?

SUMITRA	:	We had some good discussions.
BILL	:	Great. So what do you think?
SUMITRA	:	Deepok had another idea.
BILL	:	Great. But what did you think of my idea?
SUMITRA	:	We wondered if you've ever thought of trying...?
BILL	:	Not really. Do you believe that we should?
SUMITRA	:	Oh it's just a suggestion.

So what does Bill "hear" and what does Sumitra "mean?" Bill is used to getting critical or negative feedback in the form of negative statements, things like: "I see a problem here." "I don't think that will work," or "That's not such a good idea." Because this is the form negative feedback takes in his culture, when he does not hear any statements that sound like these, he naturally assumes Sumitra is happy with his suggestion.

But in the very hierarchy-sensitive Indian culture when one is dealing with a senior, with the client, or with someone higher up in the chain of command, it is often necessary to be especially polite and respectful, to be very careful how one critiques the suggestion of a senior. The "critique" often takes the form not of saying something negative but of very conspicuously not saying anything positive. The conspicuous absence of positive feedback, in short, is equal to negative feedback.

So when Sumitra (1) does not even answer Bill's first email (absence of any feedback), when she says (2), "Oh yes, we got that one" and offers no positive observations, and when she says (3) "We had some good discussions" and still offers no positive comments—when Sumitra misses three opportunities to praise Bill's suggestion, conspicuously displaying no enthusiasm or excitement, that is her feedback. But Bill would never interpret the absence of positive feedback as negative feedback; Sumitra would have to say something negative. To put this another way, the conspicuous absence of praise would not be apparent at all to Bill; it doesn't mean anything.

Now let's consider the last two observations Sumitra makes: "Deepok had another idea" and "Have you ever thought of trying...?" Like most Westerners, Bill will interpret these two statements literally: "Deepok had another idea" means to Bill that Sumitra knows somebody who would design this platform differently. And Bill thinks: Interesting, but why are you telling me this? And Bill believes "Have you ever thought of trying...?" means Sumitra wants to know if Bill has considered other ways to design the platform. And again, Bill would think: Why are you asking me this?

But it's likely that Sumitra's two statements actually mean: We should do this the way Deepok once did it and there is another—i.e., better—way of doing this. Indian culture demands that Sumitra be careful how she tells Bill (her superior) that his suggestion is weak and likewise careful how she suggests another approach since any mention of an alternative is an implied criticism of Bill's idea. And that might cause Bill to lose face and otherwise be construed as disrespectful.

Once again because of misinterpretations Bill is going to miss completely, Sumitra's critical feedback and her suggestions of a "better way," and Sumitra is going to be quite sure she communicated these messages to Bill. And we end up with Bill's complaint that Indians don't tell us if they think something's wrong or they know a better way—and with Sumitra's assertion that of course she tells Bill these things, but he just doesn't listen.

Strategy

Bill should explain to Sumitra that not saying anything positive is not considered negative feedback by people like Bill. She needs to be more direct, using language like I see a problem with that solution, or I don't think that will work because... or We can try that but....

As far as suggesting a better way, Sumitra also needs to be direct: We think you should try this. We believe this is a better way because....

For his part, Bill should consider first asking Sumitra what she would do in this situation rather than proposing his solution and then asking her what she thinks of it. Once he puts his idea on the table, then Sumitra has to be especially careful how she critiques it (in order not to come across as disrespectful to a senior), so careful that her remarks will not sound like criticism at all to Bill.

3. Indians Don't Ask Questions Or For Clarification If They Don't Understand

This complaint is usually not the result of a cultural misinterpretation, but it does have its roots in a major cultural difference. In hundreds of training seminars with Indians and Westerners over the years, I have heard about this issue more than almost any other. The cultural difference here is that Western seniors (managers, etc.) expect their subordinates to ask them questions if an explanation has not been understood; indeed, they rely and depend on them to do this. Asking for clarification is crucial in Western cultures because Westerners are reluctant to give too many details, too much guidance and instruction when they explain things, for fear of saying too much and insulting the other person's intelligence and also because they want to give direct reports as much freedom as possible to do their work. As a result, they deliberately give general, broad instructions, leaving out details on purpose. And because direct reports know this, there is no hesitation on their part to ask questions if they need more guidance.

While things are changing in India, this is not how this dynamic has traditionally played out in the Indian workplace. Rather, as many Indians have explained to me, they are reluctant to ask too many questions of their superiors if they (the subordinates) have not understood something very well.

Direct reports say there are three reasons they are not comfortable asking questions:

- They don't want to be a nuisance, to take up too much of the manager's time (so they often ask questions of each other but not the manager).
- They are afraid it might make them look bad/incompetent to infer (by asking too many questions) that they did not understand the explanation.
- They worry that if they ask questions this might suggest the manager did not give a very good explanation and this could embarrass the manager and/or cause the manager to lose face.

Regardless of the reason, if Indian subordinates are uncomfortable asking questions and if Western managers are relying and depending on them to ask questions (because the Westerners are afraid to give too much information)—then we have a serious knowledge gap. Indeed, many Indians have told me that in such cases rather than ask for clarification, they just try something and hope it is what the Westerners were asking for. Needless to say, this is very frustrating for the Westerners and can quickly undermine good working relations.

Strategy

Westerners should make it very comfortable for Indians to ask questions or for clarification. Tell Indians that you had many questions when this was first explained to you and that you know they must have questions. Another obvious strategy here is that if Indians are not going to ask questions, then you can't give general, broad explanations, deliberately leaving out details. You have to include all the details you can think of and hope it is enough.

For their part, Indians should realize that Westerners are leaving out details on purpose, relying on Indians to ask for help if they need it, and Indians should not worry that asking questions will come across as rude or make them look incompetent.

4. Indians Don't Like To Take Ownership Or Accept Responsibility

This is a claim I frequently hear about Indians, but it is not something I have ever observed in India or with Indians working here in the West. But I think I know where this observation, flawed as it may be, comes from.

Consider this exchange:

RALPH : Hey, Anju. What's up?

ANJU : We fixed those two problems with that Windows application.

RALPH : Great. Thanks.

ANJU : And we found another problem that needed to be fixed.

RALPH : Great. Thanks for fixing that one too.

ANJU : Did you want us to fix that one?

In this scenario the manager Ralph has sent the direct report Anju off to fix two problems. She found the problems, fixed them, and then found a third problem. And she felt she had to make a decision: Should she fix the third problem, thereby making the person with this problem very happy and keeping the project on schedule but potentially exceeding her authority (she was only told to fix two problems)? Or should she wait, frustrating for whoever has the third problem, consult with her manager, and thereby not exceed her authority? For many Indians, the best choice is to go back and consult with the manager. And for many Western managers, this behavior would be very frustrating because they would expect Anju to take responsibility for the situation, use her own judgement, and fix the third problem.

But one hastens to add that this would depend entirely on the nature of the third problem. If it is very similar to the other two problems, most Western managers would expect Anju to act on her own. But if the problem was of an altogether different kind, something Ralph could not have anticipated, then even a Western manager might want Anju to come back and consult before acting.

The cultural difference here is that by and large Western managers, compared to traditional Indian managers, delegate more responsibility to their direct reports, regularly empowering them to make certain routine decisions, with the result that in situations like the one in this scenario, it would be completely natural for the direct report to assume her manager would expect her to act on the third problem without getting permission. And it would be disappointing if she did not, leading to the complaint that "Indians don't like to take responsibility." Indian managers, in my experience—and in the experience of most of my Western clients—delegate less often and less widely, so that it would be natural for the Anju's of the world to assume their manager would want them to check with him/her before taking up responsibility. But while

it might be less likely that an Indian boss would delegate, I have never seen any reluctance on the part of Indians to accept responsibility if it has clearly been delegated. Indians, in short, aren't afraid of accepting responsibility; they just never automatically assume it has been given to them.

Strategy

The Ralph's of the world need to have a conversation with the Anju's of the world, spelling out in detail what decisions/actions they are delegating to Anju and which actions she should get permission before taking. As long as Anju knows what is expected of her, she will not hesitate to act. It's only when she's not sure that her instinct will be to get permission.

If Westerners don't spell out their expectations, Indians should initiate a conversation with them to determine when they want Indians to act on their own and when they want Indians to ask first.

5. Indians Over-Commit; They Promise More Than They Can Possibly Deliver

Our last issue is once again a question of a cultural misinterpretation. The complaint is the Western perception that Indians agree to requests they can't possibly achieve in the time frames specified. "They should just tell us," Westerners say, "if our demands are unreasonable." And Indians, of course, respond with "But we do tell them; they just don't listen." And they probably do tell Westerners, but not in the way Westerners are used to or able to understand.

Consider:

CAROL : Hi Anand. We were thinking this batch should take your guys about 15 hours. How does that sound to you?

ANAND : 15 hours?

CAROL : Give or take. What do you think?

ANAND : Sure. So that's your best estimate, then?

CAROL : As near as we can figure it. But you guys know better than us.

ANAND : I see.

CAROL : So what do you say, Anand?

**ANAND** : That would be very efficient.

CAROL : Just like you guys always are.

In this example Anand honestly believes he has told Carol that her time frame is unrealistic, and he assumes she understands this. But of course, the Carol's of the world would not interpret Anand's remarks this way and would assume he is comfortable with her timetable. And thus we end up with the (Western) complaint that Indians over-commit and the (Indian) response that the Westerners just don't listen. The Westerners do listen, of course; they just don't hear.

The problem is the way Anand objects to Carol's timetable of 15 hours. He never actually says it's not enough time, which is what he would have to do for Carol to understand. Instead, Anand (1) never says it is enough time (which is very significant in Indian culture, but much less so in Western cultures), and (2) he never actually answers her questions. Or, more accurately, he responds to each of her questions by sending it back to her: "15 hours?" and "So that's your best estimate, then?" And finally responds with the completely noncommittal (hence, very significant) "I see." Carol has taken Anand's words and interpreted them according to what they mean in her culture, not his, and unfortunately the two cultures understand these words/these behaviors in very different ways.

Strategy

Westerners should encourage Indians to push back against unrealistic assignment/timetables more directly, and they should assure Indians that this is not impolite or disrespectful in Western culture. Another piece of advice, given earlier, is to encourage Indians to speak to Western seniors the same way they talk to Indian peers (i.e., frankly).
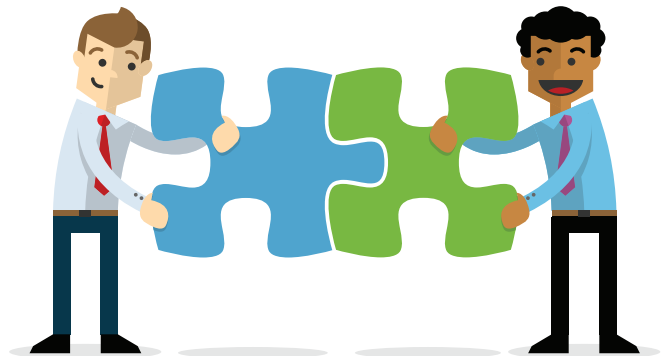
For their part, the Carol's of the world might be better off asking Ananda for his estimate rather than giving theirs and then asking Ananda what he thinks of it. If Carol asks Anand first, before putting her estimate on the table, Anand can say whatever he thinks. If she proposes first, then he has to be polite in his response. And Indian-style "polite, as we have seen repeatedly in this paper, is often misinterpreted by literal-minded, more direct Westerners.

So Who is to Blame?

Before discussing the solutions to these cultural challenges, we would like to point out that in each of the examples we have analyzed in this paper, neither party knew there was a cultural misunderstanding (or there would not have been one) and of course neither party intended to create a misunderstanding. Neither Carl, nor Bill, nor Ralph, nor Carol were trying to misread what their Indian counterparts were saying, and nor were Indira, Sumitra, Anju, or Anand trying to mislead the Westerners. Everybody did the right thing in each of these examples, but because of cultural differences there were a series of honest, innocent misunderstandings.

Which means no one is to blame. This is a critical point because if either of the two parties in offshore projects believe the other party is deliberately trying to be difficult, trying to mislead or misinterpret, then there are going to be hard feelings, frustrations, and, ultimately, very poor working relationships. But if the two parties realize that the misunderstandings are completely unintentional, then they will be much less likely to be upset, to blame one another for what are, at the end of the day, completely innocent misinterpretations. Once blame sets in, it is difficult for offshore partnerships to get back on course. This is why cultural differences have to be acknowledged and why people from the two cultures need to be made aware of their differences.

Solutions

So why do these cultural problems persist and what can be done about them? They continue for three reasons:

- Neither side wants to acknowledge cultural differences. It serves no one's purpose to suggest that going offshore might be harder than staying onshore. Indians certainly don't want to suggest to potential clients and/or partners that you may have more trouble dealing with us than if you kept your operations in your own culture. And Western clients, already under pressure from their workforce not to send jobs offshore, certainly don't want to suggest it's going to be harder working with Indians.

- Cultural problems are not obvious. Even those companies who are willing to acknowledge and keen to address cultural differences often do not do so because these differences are difficult to detect. They are not visible, after all, and they are not something people are consciously aware of. People may know—or more accurately, they may sense—that something's not quite right, but they can't figure out what's going on. To support this observation we might note that when Indians and Americans working together are asked what their most common cultural challenges are, by far the most mentioned problem is language; specifically, Westerners say they can't understand Indians on the phone or face-to-face. While this can certainly be a legitimate problem, one cannot escape the conclusion that it gets mentioned so often because it's one of the few challenges that is more or less visible, hence relatively easy to detect. But note that it is a language problem, not a cultural problem. True cultural challenges cause more frustration than language issues, but they are just not as obvious.

- People don't understand culture. Many people working on offshore projects have never worked closely before with someone from another culture. Since they have not experienced the results of cultural differences before, they are not in a position to identify the challenges they face as being caused by culture. If you are not aware that you are having problems created by cultural differences, you are also not aware that you need to increase your awareness of those differences to resolve those issues. Thus, the problems persist.

What's even worse is that not knowing that culture is the origin of their difficulties, people tend to blame colleagues from the other culture who, they just assume, are deliberately trying to mislead, misread, confuse, or otherwise annoy them. The effects of these mutual recriminations and the poor working relations they lead to are the main reasons that cultural differences must be addressed as part of offshore project management.

What Should Project Managers do?

Here is a simple 3-step roadmap to address the key cultural challenges of offshore project management:

1. Do not minimize or otherwise downplay cultural differences; this approach will only backfire. In this regard, it's important to realize that cultural differences in and of themselves are not problems; they only become problems when the two parties are not aware of the differences.

2. Acknowledge that India/name of Western country are different cultures, and people from the two cultures will sometimes surprise, confuse, and frustrate each other by their behaviors—but that is almost never their intention.

3. Using cross-cultural training, raise the awareness of all key project team members of the most common differences between their cultures.

If you need to make the business case to senior management for offering cultural training, here is the five-point speech you should give:

1. Do people in our organization work closely with people from India / Western country?

2. Are there differences between these two cultures?

3. Are all the players fully aware of these cultural differences?

4. Do you think not being aware of these differences could cause problems?

5. Then you need to support cultural training.

Take Heart

Readers are reminded that the avowed purpose of this paper was to identify and discuss the challenges Indians and Westerners face when they work together. In so doing, we have naturally run the risk of sounding unduly pessimistic, perhaps even of sounding as if we are trying to undermine the whole appeal East-West partnerships. So let us end on a positive note...

While there are very real cultural differences between East and West, and while these differences can indeed lead to misunderstandings and frustrations, none of these misunderstandings are deal-breakers. Cultural differences notwithstanding, Indians and Westerners have been working on projects together happily and successfully for more than 30 years, and they will continue to do so for many years to come.

We have not shown a light on cultural challenges to suggest that East-West partnerships are doomed to fail, but rather to point out that addressing these challenges will only enhance what are already very effective partnerships.

Craig Storti is the author of Speaking of India: Bridging the Communications Gap When Working with Indians and an internationally known trainer in the field of intercultural communications. He can be reached at: craig@craigstorti.com.