Multinational Projects with Latin America
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Abstract

If you have ever participated in a multinational project you have experienced the consequences of multicultural exchange. In some cases this cultural mix may help the project thrive but in others it should be called cultural clash. Being aware before hand of what you may find usually helps. Working on Cultural Competence as a key skill in the new global world is even more effective. Regardless of what culture/s we are working with, nourishing your flexibility, listening skills and creativity will make you more successful. When doing projects with Latin America in particular there is a set of peculiarities that should not take you by surprise and we will cover those in this paper. Whatever you do to be a competent Project Manager never forget to give yourself the opportunity to be surprised and enjoy your experience!

Introduction

Talking about Latin America as one thing is like talking about Europe as one thing. Can we generalize about Europeans?

"Latin America is a large region that covers all the territory in the Western Hemisphere south of the United States. It consists of Mexico, Central America, South America and the islands of the West Indies. The region is divided into 33 countries and 13 other political units. Brazil is by far the largest country in Latin America both in area and in population. It occupies more than 40 percent of the region's land area and has about a third of its people." Ropp, Steve C. (2003) The World Book Encyclopaedia (2003 Ed. Vol. 12) Chicago: World Book, Inc.

Portuguese is the primary language in Brazil, so only two thirds of Latin America uses Spanish as official language. There are other European languages in colonies or ex-colonies like English, French and Dutch. Finally many of the countries still use native languages and dialects to communicate.

The area is 21 million square kilometres and it hosts about 542 million people. About a third of all Latin Americans are under 15 years old. The racial composition of the population is very varied and most races are found in the region.

Exhibit 1: Schematic visualization of Latin America

The four biggest Latin American cities rank amongst the largest of the world. In their own languages those are: Ciudad de Méjico, Méjico; São Paulo, Brasil; Rio de Janeiro, Brasil; Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The Culture

Once we get more acquainted with Latin America it is easier to see how it is not a homogeneous culture but a geographic setting for a partly shared history. Most of Latin America was conquered by the Spanish and converted to Catholicism. However the original civilizations where different and thus the result of the colonization varies depending on what was being colonized and converted. Even Catholic practices differ to date in spite of major efforts from the Vatican to make the religious practice more uniform throughout the Continent.

Having shown all the reasons for differences to exist there are many similarities as well. Most people from Latin America can communicate fairly well with one another using Spanish. The majority are Catholics. Given the racial mix and having all races represented in all classes the real discrimination is based on class and not on race. It may be argued that the higher in the social scale people are paler and the lower in the social scale they are darker. That may sometimes be true, however, dark skin does not condemn you to the lower part of the society as well as white skin does not ensure you access to the higher classes. Level of education is a factor by which people are valued. The discussion about racism in Latin America is far from over but it is my opinion that discrimination by class is more relevant than discrimination by race. Other authors believe otherwise, for example Isabel Allende in her book *My Invented Country* writes in very Latin style: "Whoever maintains that racism is a thing of the past is dead wrong…" And goes on to give a recent example referring to Chile.

Some native groups have been left behind in their original state especially in hard to access remote locations. This paper does not refer to them but to the westernised part of the society, which would be the one, you would be working with in a corporate setting. If you are actually going to work with one group that has been isolated for centuries and not influenced by the European conquest I strongly suggest you should study them specifically in advance.

Methodology

Questionnaire

This paper is not based on a scientific study, however input from people from different regions of the world was requested to enrich and widen the spectrum of my own professional experience. This conference was presented in Buenos Aires, Argentina in August 2002, in North Carolina, USA in August 2003 and will be presented in April in the EMEA Global Congress in Prague in April 2004. The questionnaire presented to the attendees in each occasion is the same except for necessary variations in question number 1 showed in exhibit 2.

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1. a. Have you ever worked in a Project with people from Latin America? (Europe, Middle East & Africa 2004)
   b. Have you ever worked in a Project with people form the Hispanic Community and/or Latin America? (NC, USA August 2003)
   c. Have you ever worked in a Multinational Project ? (Buenos Aires, in Spanish Aug 2002)
2. Who was the owner of the project? From what country/culture?
3. Please enumerate the 3 obstacles you had to deal with that you consider culturally rooted. Name the country of origin of the people if you consider it of relevance.
4. How did you solve these issues?
5. Where there any unsolved issues or issues you could not consistently address with PM tools? Please describe them and your approaches to solve them.

Exhibit 2: questionnaire used to gather information in different PMI events

The questionnaire is very simple and it is being filed in from people from all over the world on an ongoing basis as part of a broader investigation for future research.

Reported Issues

Point of view from Buenos Aires, Argentina about Multinational Projects

Poor commitment/alignment to goals
　　　　People quit the project once their agenda is met
　　　　Low priority and interest in foreign projects
　　　　Knowledge base disparity
　　　　No interest in learning needed skills
　　　　Low budget for training
　　　　No awareness on the issues
Noisy Communication:

Language: most any international project immediately assumes and official English communication standard, which is not always, the most useful approach.

Prejudice (gender, culture, etc.)

Codes, assumptions, expectations, etc

Low priority which led to lack of effort to overcome communication barriers

As a tool to halt the project: when communication is failing and people cannot put the message across they opt to stop understanding what they are told even if they do understand it. Something like "if you do not understand me, I will not understand you."

Discrimination based on:
Country of origin
Culture
Language
Gender

Multiple:
Borders
Legal environments
Socio-economic environments
Trips

Comments

It is important to know most of the issues make reference to projects with the United States and some others to projects within Latin America. That is to say people from Latin America have issues when working with other people from Latin America. Strong nationalisms are usually at the root of these issues and not culture. However one of the cultural differences within Latin America is the degree of gender discrimination. While there is strong gender discrimination in the whole region compared to the United States and Europe, some countries are worse than others. Women that can work well in Buenos Aires, Argentina, may have a very hard time in other countries.

North Carolina about projects with Latin America and/or projects with people from the Hispanic Community*

* "Hispanic or Latino is a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race" (Office of Management and Budget, White House, October 1997)

Communication issues
Language barriers: number one issue, not speaking Spanish and not being able to understand "Latin American" English
Different assumptions (units of measures, wording, etc.)
Accents: even accents got in the way of communication to a level of halting it
Plain misunderstandings

Time Zones
Remote location, lack of face to face communication

Poor commitment
Relaxed schedule management, delays
Lack of participation/attendance at scheduled meetings
Acceptance of responsibility without considering ability to complete
Last minute issues
Different sense of urgency

Fundamental differences in business styles
Reverence to Management
Controlling "paternalistic" management styles
Relationship levels (work VS personal)
Contract Negotiation (handshake over dinner)
Lack of knowledge about the non-written rules on both sides

Prejudice and gender issues
Difference between genders

Very few women in the teams

Comments

While the number one issue in North Carolina was Language, it was not very relevant in Buenos Aires at all. After further discussion on language people in Buenos Aires felt non-Spanish-speaking foreigners did not understand them but they felt they understood foreigners well. Most people in North Carolina Chapter do no speak Spanish while everybody in the Buenos Aires Chapter speaks English.

Also interesting to note is that both sides feel a lack of commitment on the other side. In North Carolina the lack of commitment is perceived when deadlines are not met, schedules are not respected and meetings are not attended on time. In Buenos Aires they feel Lack of Commitment coming from the US when projects are not appropriately budgeted and funded, people move onto new projects before the Latin American one is finished and people do not seem to care enough to learn the appropriate skills like language, culture, local laws, ways and rules.

From Europe, Middle East and Africa about Latin America

Before focusing on the most common issues let us establish some concepts that will help us see the situation with a different perspective. All generalizations a wrong but we use them to generate a certain baseline of what you may find. When you encounter and individual that does not meet the pattern you are in front of exactly that, an individual. In most cases generalizations will only be useful as a starting tool but you must keep learning from your team as you go or you will still risk failure.

In some countries of Latin America people will try very hard not to say "NO". Make sure that is not happening to you, make your own assessments and if deadlines would not be feasible for you to meet, they are most likely not attainable for anyone else. If it is too optimistic it may be they are just not daring contradict or reject you.

 In general management in Latin America ha a vertical and paternalistic style, you can even say authoritarian. However, before trying to change everything around, observe. You are probably going to be working there for a limited time and you need to focus on results and not on imposing your own style. Your target is to make it work and the local idiosyncrasies may prove to be good tools to accomplish that.

Reported Issue	Reported used solutions
Several people reported no problem at all.	Great!!
Deep nationalism within Latin America	No solutions suggested
Time Management Meeting deadlines No or slow e-mail replies Showing up late for meetings	Let them find out what they missed themselves Call on the phone instead of writing e-mails Intensive follow up Explain need for punctuality and the consequences of not being on time
Local laws Taxes	Learn about them and comply but take out the red tape
Behavioural Latin Tempers Behaviour towards women Mistrust on the unknown or unfamiliar Hard to understand the methods of business and expectations	Coach, coach, change! Show the example of how women should be treated Take time to explain expectations Get used and reciprocate
Language issues Portuguese in Brazil made it hard to incorporate that country in regional projects Using English as a project language "Many people didn't speak English, French or	Ensure a truly multilingual team Write as mush as possible Work on the relationships with face to face meetings Use bilingual colleagues

German in Argentina, Brazil and Columbia." (Colombia)	

Solutions to the issues raised in the EMEA region

Let us begin by establishing the state of mind that will better serve us to succeed in Multicultural and Multinational projects. Ask yourself the question: **"Do I want to be right or to succeed in this project?"** which is a free version of the original phrase "Do I want to be right or to be happy?" (Mentruyt, 2002). It is a fundamental question since falling in the trap of judging behaviour, approaches or even solution venues may jeopardize your chances to succeed!

If what you want is to succeed and being right is in a lower priority you will find more tools at your hand to manage your challenging project. It is necessary to clarify that not being judgmental does not include allowing or fostering illegal behaviour. It means not limiting yourself or your team to the way you have done things in the past. It also means being able to capitalize on the advantages that diverse approaches will most likely bring to your project.

We will use the list of raised issues in Exhibit 3 and will suggest approaches one by one:

Deep nationalism within Latin America

The nationalist feelings within a team are potentially devastating. This comes out specially in the way of not wanting a task pertaining country A to be done by team members from country B or altogether in country B. For example any kind of information consolidation centre project will meet with these issues extensively. Part of it is plain national pride "We can do our own work" or "They are not better than us". The rest may have to do with information manipulation that will not be possible in the future if someone else is doing the consolidation. It does not necessarily mean they were illegally changing it but they could have been reporting it using their own classification criteria or understanding of the local business environment that only they have.

It is the best approach to assume that you will have nationalist people in your team and act accordingly. If you find the team does not mind different national origins, celebrate! Our recommendation is that you openly deal with it upfront. Explain what you are going to do, why, and ask for feedback. Encourage honest responses by being a very good listener and allowing all concerns to be out there. Do not dismiss anything until you understand the whole picture they are portraying. Address those issues well and beg them to keep bringing them up. Chances are they may have a valid business point buried there and you do not want to overlook it. I say buried there not because I am trying to be funny but because emotion comes first and you have to cut through the clutter and find the issue you would be interested in and ignore all the rest.

Some countries in Latin America have long lasting historic rivalries. Others have more recent sports ones that could be even more passionate. Be aware.

Time Management

This is probably the number one issue people have when working with Latin America. Meeting deadlines, no or slow e-mail replies, showing up late for meetings. Again in this case you need to explain your expectations even if they are obvious to you. **Nothing** is obvious in a multicultural project! Request and accept feedback about this. Some delays may be due to real issues that you may be able to help solve. Oftentimes, and due to a certain reverence to management, people will not object to a schedule even if they know it is physically impossible for them to make it. Try to make sure you work around it by finding out what they will be doing before the meeting and after.

If your e-mails are not answered do not assume the worst, be concerned about the workload the team may be experiencing. Always put yourself as a solution source and not a work dumper. This approach will help you lower your own frustration and will help your team be more productive. Call and inquire about the family, the weather (specially if there has been a natural disaster) and the general well being of the people. After that, ask if e-mail is a good communication tool, ask why it was not responded in a timely manner, explain what a timely response means to you, ask about the rest of the work.

It is very helpful to stay tuned to natural, social and political issues that may be causing worries to your team.

Getting to meetings on time may be the most challenging one. It is rooted on a different set of values: time is not money but a treasure to share wisely. So, having a personal conversation may be more important than getting to a meeting on time. Definitely eating relaxed is more important that complying with a schedule. Anything that leads to developing a personal relationship may take precedence over impersonal schedules. So, how to deal with that? Explain your expectation but make sure you listen to their perspective. Sliding schedules are immensely frustrating if you fight them but could be rather enjoyable if you go with them. This means getting into the personal relationship mood and using it as a tool. When you develop personal relationships you are also developing high levels of commitment and that may, in turn, improve the punctuality.

I also agree with the approach of doing a lot of follow up, making sure the schedule is feasible for the team, and generating a personal commitment to lure them there on time.

Local laws

Local laws are part of the complexity of doing business in other countries. Really not much to do about this but comply. Make sure you are listening to what locals are telling you in these quarters because this is one topic where they know better for sure! If you wonder why tax laws are that complicated here is a short theory o mine. Enforcement in Latin America is very difficult in general. Legal systems are VERY slow and oftentimes corrupt. Police forces are also sometimes part of the problem. So instead of laying out the rules and establishing a punishment for those who do not comply, these laws try to make it impossible to evade your taxes. Basically they are designed to make it very difficult to evade, almost counting on the fact that the people are going to try not to pay taxes. That is why they are so hard to follow and code.

Behavioural

I included in this group: Latin tempers, behaviour towards women, mistrust on the unknown or unfamiliar, hard to understand methods of business and expectations, as shown in Exhibit 3. So now you know, you may be in a meeting and someone may start yelling and become very unprofessional from your point of view. It may also happen that very few professional women from Latin America are in the teams and that they are not treated as peers. At some point you may be very puzzled because after weeks of fruitful debate a bad solution imposed by management is adopted. Yes, all this and much more may happen but "Do you want to be right or to succeed in this project?"
You need to answer that question again because the temptation to intervene is very high. The point is that you need to use the vernacular ways to meet your goals. So if the way is to talk to the manager and let him execute, do that. If you notice a dynamic by which some team members are more receptive than others to your guidelines, team up with them. Observe the women twice! They may seem submissive but they may be successful at advancing their own agendas. Be an acute observer and design your strategy with the patterns you find. In many cases disturbing the waters may not be the wisest move. Whatever you find in terms of established order may be very complex and not worth changing on your own.

A separate issue is mistrust. We are known to be very mistrusting and History could easily be blamed for it. The fact is that the only way to overcome mistrust is with a personal relationship. By personal I mean something in the road to friendship. In fact many people in Latin America socialize extensively out of work with coworkers. Many remain friends for years after changing jobs.

Language issues

Brazil is the biggest and most gravitating country in the region, this makes it a good regional headquarter. However, the language difference is an issue. The Spanish and Portuguese language barrier is the only authentic regional barrier and it is not a very solid one. Those are two very similar languages that often times are understood with little effort by native speakers. Teams may be able to work even using both languages at the same time successfully if that is the only issue at hand. In some cases language is the apparent issue but it is covering for nationalist or other deeper problems.

Expecting Latin America to speak, read, write and understand English or any language than the official one is unrealistic. Even though in countries like Argentina many people speak English, projects should not be based on the hope of locals having skills without making sure they do. The language skills should be sought for in your team members as any other skill. You may look for bilingual people in Latin America but you can also look for people that speak Spanish and Portuguese in your countries. Even though native Spanish and Portuguese speakers can understand each other fairly well, you cannot expect the same to happen with people whose Spanish or Portuguese is a second language.

Conclusion

Even though the same type of problems where expressed by Europeans and North Americans the level of conflict and the level of understanding is different. In general Europeans are closer to understanding and managing multicultural projects maybe due to the multicultural and multinational setting Europe presents. It seems to be the Europeans are more used to being exposed to other idiosyncrasies on a more regular basis. Europeans also show a higher level of resignation with comments like "not much you can do", "learn what they do and pay back", "it makes little sense to hammer on things YOU perceive and an issue" showing high levels of adaptability, empathy and sense of humour. It could even be suggested that including European team members in American and Latin American projects may provide the idea diversity to overcome cultural differences.

My experience and the received input suggest that people from the Middle East and Africa have fewer issues than Americans and Europeans when working with Latin America. It seems some of the traits are shared as well and the positions we occupy in the world as developing countries. We might be used to the same instability scenarios, less resources and a deeper need for personal and family ties for survival.

PMBOK Solution mapping

So where to include all these suggestions in the context of the PMBOK©? Here are the suggestions we have worked with and have been most successful for us. Beside the suggestion we indicate if it is an Input (I), Tools and Techniques (T&T) or an Output (O).

HR Management
- 9.1 Organizational Planning
    - Project Interfaces (I)
    - Staffing Requirements (I)
    - Constraints (I)
    - Stakeholders Analysis (T & T)
    - Staffing Management Plan (O)
    - Supporting detail (O)
        - Organizational Impact
        - Training Needs
- 9.2. Staff Acquisition
- Staffing Pool description (I)
- Recruitment Practices (I)
- 9.3 Team Development
- Team Building Activities (T&T) (for multi-cultural teams)
- Reward and Recognition Systems (T&T)
- Training (T&T)
- Input to performance Appraisals (O)

Communications Management
- 10.1 Communications Planning
    - Communication Requirements, Constraints & Assumptions (I)
    - Stakeholder Analysis (T&T)

- **New Suggested Output**: "How to deal with multi-culture derived communication issues", have a plan in place or a guideline on how to address these situations when they arise
- 10.3 Performance Reporting
  - Performance reviews (T&T)
- 10.4 Administrative Closure
  - Lessons Learned (O)

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