Abstract
To meet the demands of managing complex projects, project leaders face challenges of daily leadership behavior and organizational vision to manage a project team. The challenges are compounded when the task of creating a project culture is also influenced by cultural, ethnic and corporate differences. A program management team involves many disciplines: project management, planning and engineering, cost estimating, scheduling, material procurement, program controls, management information systems, administration, construction inspection, and others. Different personality types often gravitate to predictable areas of function during the course of their careers. Managing these differing personality types is one challenge of program leadership.

Another equal challenge is managing people of widely differing cultural and ethnic backgrounds. What is regarded as a routine order by one culture can be considered as an extreme insult by another. Good natured American jokes about one group can deeply offend members of that group even though the intentions may not be malicious. In addition to these ethnic and cultural sensitivities, the personalities attracted to the individual disciplines can be even more magnified. The greatest challenge of leadership lies in identifying strengths and similarities while valuing the differences to accomplish the common program management goals.

The program management team used as an example in this paper consists of native born Caucasian Americans, African-Americans, African-Caribbeans, Middle-Easterners, Asian-Indians, Mexicans, Cuban-Americans and other Latin-Americans. The paper discusses the experiences of adopting different leadership styles, behavior and communication links to improve the performance of individual leaders and management team.
1. Introduction

Project teams comprised of members from differing cultural, ethnic, corporate, and gender backgrounds can be significantly superior to homogeneous teams if properly managed. They can also be much worse than even a poorly managed homogeneous team if leaders ignore the differences between people of different group backgrounds.

Certain characteristics of leadership can enhance the chances for success in working with diverse project teams. An open style of management increases trust. A good sense of humor can diffuse potential misunderstandings. A sincere interest by the project manager in his staff as individuals goes a long way toward creating good morale. A good communication style is also important. Many teams are composed of members who do not speak the language of the dominant group as their first language.

An understanding of the differences in group world views is essential to promoting understanding between team members. The same event can be interpreted differently by people depending on where they are from and what they have been conditioned to believe. Understanding and avoiding stereotypes can prevent self-fulfilling prophesies.

2. The Project Example

The project team used as an example from time to time in this paper was assembled to manage the design and construction of a $200 million infrastructure rehabilitation program in Miami, Florida. The project is known as the Pump Station Improvement Program. The team was composed of nearly 50 technical, administrative, and managerial staff from 5 separate consulting organizations. Many minority ethnic groups were represented on the team: Hispanic/Latino, Arab, Indian, African-American, and Asian. Numerous nationalities were also represented: American, Indian, Jamaican, Dominican, Venezuelan, Cuban, Palestinian, and Lebanese. Several religions were also on board: Christian, Jew, Moslem, Hindu, and Buddhist.

The corporate cultures of the management team firms were also decidedly varied. The largest firm had 3,500 employees and highly evolved policies and procedures. The smallest firm had less than 10 employees and a much less formal structure. Three of the firms were minority owned, including a Black Business Enterprise; a Woman Business Enterprise, and an Hispanic Business Enterprise.

The management team supervised the design efforts of several major consulting engineering firms, and the construction activities of several large and numerous small contractors. The project works consisted of the rehabilitation of over 400 sewage pumping stations and the construction of about 70 miles of new force mains.

The program manager was Anglo-American Male. The deputy program managers were Anglo-American Male, African-American Male, Arab-American Male, and Anglo-American Female. The resident client representative was Cuban American Male.
3. Projects Versus Permanent Organizations
Projects are very different from permanent organizations.

Permanent organizations exist to provide a continuing service or to make a product. The organization can develop procedures over time to help it achieve maximum efficiency and to protect its continued existence. Permanent organizations are rarely equipped with sufficient staff to handle a major project when it comes along without seeking outside help, so a project team is usually formed.

A project has a stated goal. It is not part of the normal operations of the parent organization. The project has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The project team exists, on the other hand, to complete its task and to dissolve itself. The leadership of a project team must constantly balance this temporary aspect with the human need to belong, to be gratified, and to have security.

Project teams with multiple cultural, gender, ethnic, and corporate compositions are becoming more typical. Economics is becoming increasingly global. A project in Saudi Arabia may be designed by a French firm, managed by a German firm, and constructed by a Korean firm using Pakistani labor and Turkish trades erecting Italian steel on concrete foundations using Portland cement from Egypt. An American public works project in a major city may require a management team that reflects the ethnic and cultural demographics of the community. That same project may also demand diversity in technological and administrative skills.

The types of people who succeed in permanent organizations are not always the same types who make it on project teams. Many bureaucrats, for example, do not like being on project teams because project organization and procedures are subject to constant change to reflect the always changing nature of the work. A perfectionist can also often be extremely uncomfortable on a project team. Schedule and cost driven demands do not always allow the luxury of a studied, measured, perfect solution to the problem at hand.

The inherently diverse nature of project work coupled with the increasingly diverse nature of project teams makes for an interesting leadership opportunity for project managers.

4. Group Identities
For purposes of this paper, a group identity is a personal affiliation with other people with whom one shares certain things in common. These identities are important to understanding how cultural diversity can impact a project team. Even though every person is a unique individual, and should always be treated as an individual, it is important to remember that his self concept has been formed to some degree by the group he is affiliated with.

For some individuals, affiliation and identification with his group is more important than it is to other individuals. To ignore group identities is to ignore a reality of how people
interact with one another. Even if you don't identify strongly with a group, you may still be treated as a member of the group by others. For example, a woman executive who does not particularly identify with her gender group may still be treated as a woman first and an executive second by some of her coworkers. A black Nigerian may identify more strongly with his religion than his race, but still be treated as a member of a black group by some coworkers.

There are many types of groups. Cultural, corporate, national, racial, religious, educational, professional, ethnic, gender, sexual preference, political, etc. Some group identifications are easy to make visually. Skin color and gender, for example, are evident to anyone with good vision. This is also the reason why racial and gender prejudice are more typical than any other. Cultural differences are less obvious. If someone identifies strongly with his culture, it means he shares certain beliefs with other members of the culture. He can identify with several groups, of course. He is male, American, white, a Florida Gator, a Catholic, a Midwesterner. Or she is female, black, a lawyer, a Protestant, a southerner, and American. They belong to more than one group, in other words.

A Jamaican may be a black, Protestant, engineer. But the group he identifies most with may be his national identity, Jamaican. An American also may be a black, Protestant, engineer, but he may identify most strongly with his black group and not so much with his nationality as an American. The relative importance to the individual of these group identities has a lot to do with his self concept. The history of blacks in America is decidedly different than the history of blacks in Jamaica. This group history plays some part in the way the black American and the black Jamaican view their worlds and the way in which they react to project challenges and relationships with other people.

5. **Advantages of Diversity**

Diverse project teams can be more innovative and creative than teams where everyone is alike. Multiple points of view can be focused on any project problem. Creativity feeds on diversity since a project must draw on every aspect of its being to succeed, not just some elements (Kanter, 1983).

A group that is homogeneous, on the other hand, tends to have the same world view. Members of the group have been raised in a culture that believes certain things, expects certain behaviors, and has created reward and punishment systems to reinforce those systems. Even though not all members of a group will react predictably or uniformly, certain normal attitudes can be expected. In some cultures - Japan, for example - modesty and quiet demeanor are valued. A member of this culture might believe that "a nail that sticks up out of a board will be quickly hammered down" (Fernandez, 1993). This belief can lead to hesitancy. One of the dangers of a homogeneous group then becomes "group think". Everyone assumes that since everyone else believes the same thing it must be a good idea.

A heterogenous group comprised of members of different cultures is more likely to
come up with alternate solutions to a problem (Nemeth, 1986). Minority viewpoints are not always obvious to majority group members. If the group environment values diversity and the differences in people, these solutions can be a more regular part of the project environment than in an equivalent homogeneous team. Different world views often lead to different solutions to identical problems.

Diverse groups also have a broader and more varied base of experience from which to draw from in solving project problems. More alternatives are generated to the solution of a problem. The diverse group is also more flexible in adapting to change. Managing diversity also enhances organizational flexibility (Hoffman, 1961). This is extremely important in project work because of the constantly changing nature of the work. There is even some evidence that members of minority groups are more flexible thinkers. For example, research has shown that women have a higher tolerance for ambiguity than men (Rotter, 1982). This can be linked to the ability to perform ambiguous tasks. Other research shows that bilingual people have higher levels of divergent thinking and cognitive flexibility than monolingual (Lambert, 1977). Since the incidence of bilingualism is much greater among minority culture groups, it appears that cognitive flexibility on a project team is increased by including these minority groups.

6. Disadvantages of Diversity
A diverse group by definition is not homogeneous. A homogeneous group tends to speak the same language. They use the same words, expressions, meanings, and the same verbal and non-verbal cues to meaning. It is much easier for members of these groups to communicate and understand one another. They have been doing it all of their lives.

A diverse group, on the other hand, may include members who speak English as their first language, but with a rural southern American twist, or an upper Midwestern twang, or the island patois of Jamaica or Dominica or Barbados. The same words may mean different things. The problem is further compounded for group members for whom English is a second or third language. They may know the basics, but lack the knowledge of the common idioms used by the dominant group. American English is especially loaded with idiomatic expressions that mean nothing to a non-native speaker of English. Americans use these idioms constantly as a type of communications shorthand.

In addition to the basic communication problems of a diverse group, group cohesiveness can be a problem. People generally like to associate with people like themselves. Most people feel more comfortable with people who have the same beliefs, values, language, and appearance. It is more difficult to create cohesiveness among members of diverse teams. Stereotypes may also be used to understand or interact with a person rather than that person’s actual character.

Some of the advantages of diverse groups, if improperly managed, can become serious disadvantages. For example, the larger numbers of alternate solutions to problems can be bad if consensus can not be reached on which is the best solution (Shephard,
1964). Also, if the goal of the project is not clearly understood by all members, the
commonality of purpose will be absent and decision making become agonizingly slow
and inefficient.

7. Examples of Cultural Differences
Not all cultures have the same concepts of space and time. The personal space a
person feels comfortable with, for example, varies from culture to culture. A
Hispanic/Latino or Italian American man may stand very close to another member of his
group while talking. If he stands just as close to an Anglo American, the Anglo might
well move back, feeling his personal space had been violated.
Some cultures focus on the future more than the past or present. For them, it is
important to have a schedule, to know what they will be doing in the future and where
they will be while doing it. This is typical, for example, of many European cultures. It is
typical of the dominant Anglo culture in America. Anglo-American culture also typically
believes in 50 and 60 hour work weeks, meetings early in the morning before normal
work hours or after normal working hours, and a strict separation of work life and family
life. Some cultures find this Anglo attitude repressive and unreasonable and cooperate
with it only because it is required to get along with the dominant Anglo group. Other
cultures are far more interested in the past and the present. For them, the future is
unreal and difficult to comprehend.

Some cultures touch a lot. Men touch women. Men kiss and hug other men. These
cultures feel touching is a normal way of life, and would feel incomplete without this way
of communicating with each other. Other cultures, however, are repulsed by this kind
of behavior. Some cultures use lots of animation and hand gestures when
communicating verbally. Other cultures are far more restrained and feel uncomfortable
in the presence of demonstrative people.

Anglo-American culture admires a steady gaze. It values looking directly into another's
eyes and holding the eye contact for long periods of time. Many Asians, on the other
hand, find this not only uncomfortable but rude. They prefer brief eye contact and long
periods of looking away.

The understanding of these cultural differences can avoid misunderstandings. If an
Anglo-American man recoils from the touch of a French man, it could be useful for the
French man to know that nothing personal is going on, that it may only be a
manifestation of an Anglo cultural preference. If an Asian man avoids direct eye
contact with an Anglo man, it does not mean he is shifty or has something to hide or is
intimidated by the Anglo man.

8. Use of Stereotypes
When people don't know much about a culture, they often use stereotypes to help them
understand an unknown individual. They identify what group they think the individual is
in, call on their memories of the group stereotype, and ascribe those qualities to the
individual. This does not always work too well.
The main reason people use stereotypes is the usefulness of it for visual and mental efficiency. It seems to simplify the task of understanding someone or something. On the other hand, there are two big problems about relying on stereotypes as a mental efficiency tool. First, your assumption about the characteristics about the group had better be correct. Secondly, even if your assumption about the group is reasonably correct, you can't be sure that the individual will be characteristic of the group.

There is a big difference between acknowledging group differences and falling back on the use of stereotypes. Valuing diversity means basing your beliefs about the characteristics of a culture on valid data. This basis is not much different than an engineer's act of gathering data and making solid assumptions to help solve a technical problem. Valuing diversity also means recognizing that there are always differences within any group. Stereotypes, on the other hand, represent not only what people believe are the differences but they also usually evaluate the differences as good or bad. This is why many stereotypes are words or phrases with built in negative or positive connotations. It is wise to avoid stereotyping.

9. Management Techniques
The technical aspects of any project require a high degree of skill in applied science. Many of the participants in a program or project will have technical degrees. This is a common bond. Engineers are trained to evaluate and solve problems in similar ways in all cultures. This common bond should be emphasized and used. An Indian engineer can understand and communicate technical principles to a Hispanic engineer. An African-American engineer can relate to an Anglo-American engineer. This common educational background and way of solving problems can create a natural bond between otherwise very different kinds of people.

Engineering, while not exactly a precise science, is still largely the application of scientific knowledge to the solution of problems involving nature and human beings. The management of project resources, however, is still more art than science since it involves the variabilities of human behavior and the unpredictability of external influences. It is useful for a project leader to have a basic grounding in the fundamental motivators of human behavior, such as fairness, consideration, salary increases, personal contact, proper use of humor, promotion and team spirit.

A project manager should have a good understanding of the project and its goals and be able to communicate them clearly. He should be a long range planner and a tactician as well. He should understand the capabilities and limitations of every member of the project team. And he should be interested in them not only as project employees but as people with individual histories of triumphs and tragedies in their careers and personal lives. The only way to develop this understanding is to visit project staff members and talk to them on a personal basis.

The differences between individuals and cultures are many and complex. No project manager can know everything there is to know, but he should make an effort. He needs to review the career resumes of everyone on the staff not only to become
familiar with experience and technical qualifications, but to look for clues to group identification and cultural affiliation. Each person on a project team identifies with his group, his school, his country, and his personal interests. It is advisable and often imperative to know as much about these aspects of your staff as possible.

Sessions should be scheduled of an informal nature with small groups to discuss the differences in cultural expectations. Ignoring the differences in people gets in the way of understanding. Valuing the differences and learning as much as you can goes a long way toward building a spirit of cooperation and enthusiasm. All team members should be informed of the attitudinal differences of other team members (Triandis, 1965). They should also be cautioned about the danger of using stereotypes.

The manager should look for things that individuals from different cultures have in common. Families, friends, education, pride, are all things that should be emphasized and related to everyone. These common elements can help understanding.

In a team with different corporate cultures and individuals from different organizations, the approach should be nonfavoritism. The manager should use techniques to build team spirit and team organizational structure should be recognized and followed instead of corporate structure. Promotion or retention of good performers following project completion also helps in motivating team members in a project environment.

Short sessions in communication techniques can also be useful to promoting understanding on the project. If American English is the language of the dominant project management group, then the use of American idioms should be closely monitored. If you use an idiom to communicate to a person who does not speak American English as his first language, look for signs of understanding. Just because he smiles does not mean he understands. Ask him if he knows what the idiom means, and explain it if he doesn’t. Here are some examples of American jargon that experience has shown not everyone on a diverse project team understands:

- Don’t let the cat out of the bag.
- The squeaky wheel gets the oil.
- He is a loose cannon.
- Yo! What it is?
- Let’s circle the wagons.
- He hits below the belt.
- Hang loose.

- Don’t buy a pig in a poke.
- Don’t step on your foot.
- Whomp there it is!!
- He shoots from the hip.
- He has a screw loose.
- He has a big head.
- Let’s play it by ear.

There are literally thousands of other examples. Remember that the person you are talking to may know English grammar better than you do, but he takes everything literally because he does not know the American jargon. Many of these people are too polite or embarrassed to ask you what you mean.

The very act of attempting to manage cultural diversity enhances project team
performance and flexibility. For example, as policies and procedures governing how the project is managed are broadened, and operating methods are made less rigid and standardized, the system should become more accommodating of uncertainty and more flexible. Also the tolerance of different points of view should lead to more openness to new ideas in general. If project management can overcome resistance to change in the area of accepting diversity, then it can also overcome resistance to other changes in the team.

10. Conclusion
Although it is impossible for any manager to know everything about all cultures and ethnic groups, it is important to learn as much as possible. The very act of expressing genuine interest in an individual and his background improves morale and understanding. This improvement translates to more effective project performance.

Some of the management techniques which promote team performance and help managing multi-ethnic and multi-cultural teams include -

- utilizing the common bond of technical knowledge
- application of fundamental human motivators
- understanding team members’ personalities
- understanding group identifications and affiliations
- valuing the differences between people
- understanding common elements
- enhancements of communication techniques
- flexible and accommodating system
- good sense of humor
- avoiding use of stereotypes

Program and construction management projects attract hard-headed, pragmatic technical types of people. There is also a role for rounded, liberally educated technical people to help facilitate the project team. The payoff is a well managed diverse project team which can perform significantly better than its homogeneous counterparts.

Communication and understanding is the root of effectively managing diverse teams.

11. References


