

# ADAPTIVE MINDSET

An effective approach to leadership in cross-cultural contexts.

By Francis Lotzer

A large international company is working on a contract to build the world's largest cruise ship. Suddenly the client decides he wants the ship delivered in 10 months, instead of the initially agreed two-year time frame. The project manager consults his three experts who are of different nationalities, and asks them whether they think this is possible. The American says, "Yes," straightaway, thinking "We can do it!" The Chinese expert responds, "Yes," thinking "I can't say no to my boss." And the French expert replies, "No," and thinks "We'll manage somehow." In some cultures 'yes' means 'no' and in others 'no' means 'yes'—which is why leaders need to have an adaptive mindset when working with cross-cultural teams.

Culture is a sensitive topic. Anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists have shared their understanding of different cultures. These theories are insightful, but bear caution that they must not be used as generalisations.

The Project Management Institute (PMI), a global organisation that defines and sets standards of excellence for project management, reports that poor communication is the number one reason why projects fail.<sup>1</sup> According to PMI, poor communication is a contributing factor in 56 percent of unsuccessful projects, which makes communicating across cultures a key challenge for every project manager. Let's take an example of a project manager in charge of an international project involving stakeholders from multiple countries, who has recently found out that his project is going to be disrupted by many changes. What should his priorities be? How should he communicate on change? How does he interpret cultural 'signals'? How can he manage confrontation?

Based on over 30 years of experience as an international project manager, I propose a universal standard for facilitating communication—one that holds for all cultures—and believe it should include the following three key tenets:

- Communicate the benefits of the change
- Understand the 'hidden' cultural signals
- Take a future-oriented approach when handling confrontation

## Communicate the benefits of the change to team members

In order to generate motivation, change must be linked to the benefit it provides for team members of the project. Robert Aldrich's movie, *Dirty Dozen*, illustrates this. Set in

1944, the film tells the story of intelligence officer Major Reisman and his top-secret mission to turn some of the U.S. Army's worst prisoners into commandos for a suicide mission just before D-Day. Reisman knows that the convicts will be motivated to take on this change in their lives only if they can see how it will benefit them. He argues, "If there is no chance of remission of their sentence, they have no reason to cooperate." No benefit, no motivation.

Suppose you are running a project in a large international training firm, delivering programmes all over the world and using trainers located in different countries. A key motivating factor for your trainers is the human element, or face-to-face contact with their participants. Your client asks you to make a disruptive change to the project—he wants to introduce a digital learning approach by incorporating e-learning into the training programmes. You know that your trainers will be reticent about adopting this new approach because they are used to training people face to face. In this situation, I would

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recommend using the Change-Advantages-Benefits technique, which states that a change that can lead to advantage(s) for the project and provide benefit(s) for project team members is far easier to implement.

The change here is digital learning. What advantages can this change bring to the project? It could potentially be an opportunity for acquiring more business at little additional cost, since the digital tools that need to be created will be paid for by the client. The number of training programmes delivered could also expand, given the wider reach of e-learning. How would these advantages translate into benefits for the trainers? The benefit could be better work-life balance in that the trainers will be able to work remotely from home.

### REFINING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Project managers need to communicate with their teams, but it is also important for them to hone their skills in communicating with other stakeholders (project management office, sponsor, board of directors, etc.). A key area to look at in greater detail is that of engagement with management. Geert Hofstede, a Dutch social psychologist, introduced the concept of the Power Distance Index (PDI), which expresses the differing degrees of acceptance of the hierarchical order in different cultures.<sup>2</sup> Based on this research, a project manager will find it easier to question or challenge a top manager from a culture with a lower PDI (Sweden, Germany, the U.K. and the U.S., for example) than one from a more hierarchical culture with a higher PDI (such as France, Singapore, India and China).

My personal experience is that top managers in even the most hierarchical cultures expect to be challenged by their project managers. This implies that, irrespective of the culture, it is in the project manager's interest to be proactive in using engagement strategies. Proposing solutions and action plans is typically well-received across cultures. On the contrary, a project manager that does nothing but complain has no credibility with top management.

### Understand cultural signals by exploring the 'hidden part of the iceberg'

Richard Lewis, in his book, *When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures*, divides cultures into roughly three categories.<sup>3</sup> Individuals from linear-active cultures, say Germany or the U.S., are polite but direct, would talk half of the time, and plan ahead step by step. People from multi-active cultures such as Southern Europe and Brazil, have a tendency to talk most of the time, do several things at once, and be more emotional. In contrast, those from reactive cultures such as Japan, China and Singapore, are polite and indirect, would listen most of the time, and react to their partners' actions. An Asian project manager once told me that he always tried to respond rapidly in his dealings with his partners. He was hence surprised when his partners in Germany took a week to respond. In reality, the Germans' reaction was not tardy—for them it was simply a matter of planning; the task would be done in due course.

Irrespective of culture, change elicits four possible reactions. People can be described as 'allied' if they are positively in favour of the change or 'divided' if they find reasons to be both for and against it. Then we have those who are 'indifferent' and do not care one way or the other, and lastly, the 'opponents' who are clearly against the change. It is important for project managers to identify these four reactions

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and take them into consideration when implementing change. In multi-active cultures they will be openly expressed, in linear-active cultures they are likely to be expressed in part, while in reactive cultures, they will probably be expressed to a much lesser extent.

The project manager will need to show empathy with his team members in order to encourage them to express their reactions. An iceberg is often used as an illustration of Freud's theory of the mind, with the visible part representing the 'conscious' and the hidden part the 'unconscious' (refer to Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> We can use this analogy when considering the following message: It's Friday afternoon, and your boss writes, "Can you come to my office on Monday? I have something to tell you." It is very likely that you will spend your weekend trying to interpret this message, asking yourself, "Did I make a mistake?" or "Does he want to offer me a promotion?" In this instance, your boss expressed only the visible part of his message, the 'said'. The hidden part of the message is called the 'unsaid'.

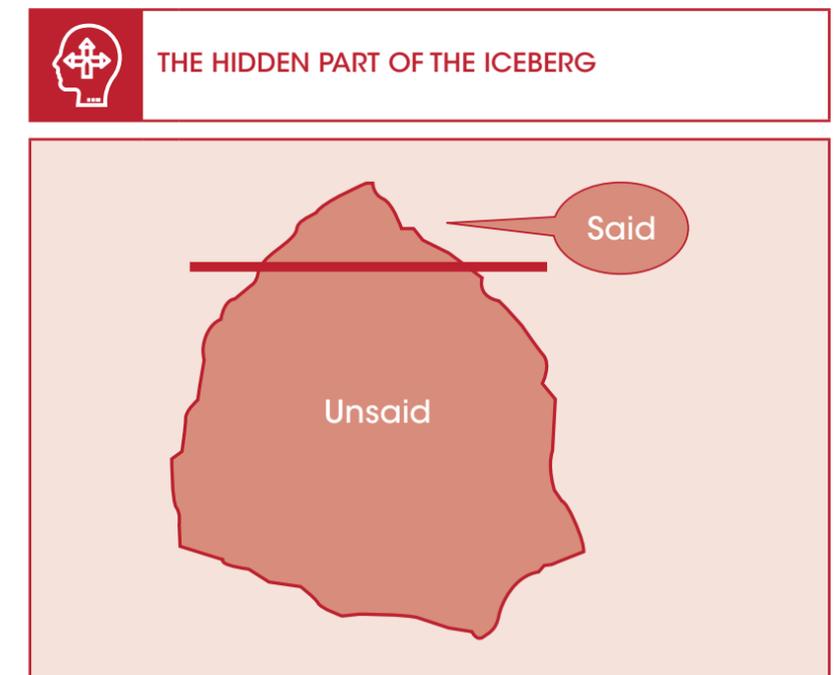


FIGURE 1

The project manager will need to show empathy with his team members in order to encourage them to express their reactions to change.

Project managers who are on the receiving end of multiple verbal and non-verbal signals emanating from different cultures need to invite colleagues to share the hidden part of their messages. They can do this by using probes such as, "What is the reason for your message?" and "Can you please elaborate?" A Singaporean project manager once told me that during a key conference call with some of his stakeholders based in Northern Europe on staffing requirements, the participants remained silent. She asked me to explain the meaning of this silence. My reply was that she simply could have asked the participants, "Can you please tell me how I should interpret your silence?"

## Take a future-oriented approach to handling confrontation

When people are faced with leaving a known situation for an unknown one, it is only natural that some would be reluctant to embrace the change. Confrontation is normal and must be accepted. In Lewis' model, linear-active cultures do not fear confrontation and they approach it with logic, whereas multi-active cultures are more emotional. Reactive cultures are non-confrontational.

Say you invite an important client to lunch and have booked a table in a restaurant you visit frequently. When you arrive, the restaurant is full and you discover that your table is in a dark and noisy section of the restaurant, close to the restroom. The situation is tense. You can respond in one of the following ways. The first is passive, where you apologise to your client, play down the problem, and say that, as the restaurant is full, you both will just have to adapt to the situation. Second, you could be aggressive, and tell the restaurant manager that you will leave unless he finds you a table at a better location. Finally, you could respond in a manipulative manner, telling the manager that you are planning to book a dinner for 10 people in his restaurant, but at the same time say that your table for today is not the best one and you will try to adapt to the situation.

These three behaviours are not negative in themselves; in fact they can be appropriate in some situations. The danger lies in over-using any one of them. An excess of passiveness, for example, can prevent us from expressing ourselves, while over-aggressiveness can lead to conflict. If we use manipulative behaviour too often, we will eventually lose the trust of others.

The fourth and final possible behaviour is assertiveness. This focuses on a constructive, mutually respectful approach. It is the quality of being self-assured and confident without being aggressive.<sup>5</sup> In this example, an assertive request to the manager could be, "I'm sorry but this table is not the one that I was expecting, what solution can we find together?"

When dealing with conflict, I recommend a universal approach based on 'saving face'. This approach is valid for both confrontational and non-confrontational cultures. When a project manager has to deal with a conflict between two of his team members, the logical response would be to bring the two together and try to understand what has happened: "We have a problem here; let's find the root cause." However, it is easy to imagine that if we go down this path, we will end up with two people blaming and accusing each other. To quote from *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving in* by Fisher and Ury, "If you ask two people why they are arguing, the answer will typically identify a cause, not a purpose."<sup>6</sup>

In the above example, the project manager needs to take the heat out of the situation and get those involved to talk about solutions rather than causes. This counter-intuitive approach is disruptive because it challenges our accepted way of dealing with conflict—to look for the cause before finding the solution. We need to realise that our accepted method is almost always doomed to fail. So instead of asking the two team members, "What happened yesterday?" the project manager should try asking, "How can you work together better tomorrow?"

## Adaptive project management

There is a saying in Thai culture that translates to, "Don't let the past destroy the future". When managing change, project managers need to take cues from the present and always look ahead. When getting the buy-in of their team, they need to show the team what lies ahead by effectively communicating the benefits of the change. Throughout the process, they need to be able to acutely understand the 'hidden' cultural signals and keep their finger on the pulse of their team. These signals, once understood, can be used to develop a future-oriented approach to handling confrontations as they arise. I am convinced that if communication from leaders is of a high standard, change will succeed even in diverse cross-cultural contexts.

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