



Global Knowledge®

Expert Reference Series of White Papers

# How to Enhance Your Global Project Management Competencies

# How to Enhance Your Global Project Management Competencies

Tom Grzesiak, PMP®, Global Knowledge Instructor

## Don't Be Complacent

Early in my career, I was managing a global project. It included 20 countries: Japan, Australia, US, Canada, and countries in Western Europe. Our core team was based in Denmark. Every day I would walk into the office and say, "Hi, how are you doing?" as I passed people in the hallway. This went on for several weeks until a team member asked me, "Tom, why do you come into the office every day and ask us how we are doing, when you have no interest in what the answer is?" Embarrassment would be an understatement. Thus began my journey to understand how to better manage global teams.

## Culture Makes a Difference

*There are two ways of securing cooperation in human action. You get cooperation by controls or you can get it by comprehension.* —Winston Churchill

The concept of culture pervades every aspect of our lives. It is based on a set of values that a society deems to be important, and demonstrated in our individual and collective behaviors and thinking our individual and collective behaviors and thinking. It represents the shared traditions of the members of a society. A society's culture is revealed through its language, beliefs, cuisine, arts, humor, and social and work habits.

It is difficult to fully appreciate a culture unless one is embedded in it. When we look at a culture from a distance, there is a natural tendency to compare it to our own, identifying the relative strengths and weaknesses. Instead of focusing on differences, we should try to leverage cultural diversity on global projects.

Hofstede's six-dimensional model is a theory of cultural dimensions that describes how a society's culture and values affect human behavior. The six dimensions are:

- Power distance is the extent to which less powerful members accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.
- Individualism versus collectivism is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups.
- Uncertainty avoidance is tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity.
- Masculinity versus femininity is the distribution of emotional roles between genders.
- Long-term orientation vs. short-term orientation is the degree to which a society focuses on the future, the past, and the present.
- Indulgence versus self-restraint is the degree to which gratification is indulged or suppressed.

We can use the model to discover high-level differences between American and Japanese cultures that affect the workplace.

Dimension	Japanese Culture	American Culture
Individualism	Group harmony is favored over individual success. A strong sense of company loyalty exists. Competition among individuals is low, but high among groups.	All members in the business hierarchy expect to be consulted. Managers view their staff as subject matter experts. A participative style of management is used.
Masculinity	Japan has one of the most masculine workplace cultures. Businesses motivate employees by focusing on beating the other team. This is also displayed in the well-known Japanese work ethic.	Americans display a high drive for success. In the workplace, this is demonstrated through annual performance appraisals that focus on achieving specific targets. Employees tend to be more goal oriented and are willing to challenge the accepted ways of doing work.
Uncertainty	Much energy is devoted to minimizing risk, and emergency plans are created. A great deal of attention is paid to ritual and ceremony. Work patterns are difficult to change.	Businesses accept uncertainty on a daily basis. They tend to think "rules are made to be broken." They show an acceptance of new ideas and a willingness to try new products, tools, and approaches.
Long-term Orientation	Businesses take a long-term view, thinking about the life of the company over many generations. This is demonstrated through employee training and development and investment in research and development.	Businesses tend to focus on short-term results—meeting their quarterly numbers. This drives goal setting, and forces employees to focus on getting their work done in a pragmatic fashion. Companies are less inclined to invest in the long-term future of their staff.

## Work Habits

Let's compare the work habits of typical IT professionals in northern Europe and India. In northern Europe, getting work done while at work is important, but it is not the focal point of a person's life. Employees typically work an eight- to ten-hour day, five days a week, and perhaps weekends when a deadline is approaching. While at work, the expectation is that short breaks are allowed, such as for lunch or to chat with one's colleagues. Many people bring in their lunch and eat at their desks while working. Meeting deadlines is a crucial part of the work culture, and one never wants to be late.

In contrast, IT professionals in India tend to be at the office for 12 hours a day. However, there is a difference: they tend to take long lunches, tea, and other breaks. Being on time is important, but not strictly adhered to. A European project manager would look at all the time spent at work and wonder how deadlines could be missed.

## Management Style

Another difference between northern Europe and India is management style. Indian businesses predominantly use an autocratic style. Getting direct information or decisions from staff members can be challenging because they would defer to their supervisor for making decisions. European businesses use a more consultative style, giving staff members more discretion to make decisions and take action.

## Public Criticism

One thing to recognize when doing business in the Arab world is it is considered impolite to publicly criticize people. This means Arabs often will agree with you even when they do not, giving you the opportunity to save face. This can make it difficult to gauge what their real position is. Meetings also tend to start late and last long. Again, worrying about time would be viewed as criticizing someone for lack of punctuality.

## English Is Not the Only Language

On many global projects, English is the lingua franca imposed on non-native English speakers. It is intended to be used simply as a common language stripped of its cultural meanings, but this is far from the truth in practice. A common language creates the illusion of a shared culture by covering over national, regional, or ethnic differences. Additionally, non-native English speakers feel their professional position is lessened because of their lack of English fluency. This can lead to non-native speakers resorting to their mother tongue in meetings, or by not inviting native English speakers to meetings.

The lack of fluency affects conversational behaviors as well. The flow of information through an organization might be altered or diminished, leading to misunderstandings and the loss of teamwork. It can be a struggle for non-native English speakers to express attitudes and emotions, leading to difficulty in creating social relationships with co-workers.

## Virtual Teams Present Unique Challenges

Lipnack and Stamps define a virtual team as “a group of people who work interdependently with a shared purpose across space, time, and organization boundaries using technology.”

Virtual teams face challenges in dealing with distance not encountered by traditional co-located teams. Global project managers need to be more proactive and help their teams determine how they will collaborate, communicate, and make decisions. Global teams work in different time zones and countries, and are often from different companies (or different departments) and technical specialties. Technology can be used to overcome distance, and it does not need to be expensive..

Typical attributes of a virtual team are:

- Communication can feel limiting. There are few opportunities for face-to-face dialogue.
- Information is not shared equally; team members exclude others from emails, messages, or conference calls.
- There is a lack of trust. Team members do not use the word *we* when referring to the team. They believe other members who are closer to the project manager receive preferential treatment.
- Conflict remains below the surface. When it appears, it is typically ignored.
- Team members are openly negative to each other. They question the credibility or competence of fellow team members.
- There is difficulty seeing the big picture. Team members are isolated from each other and the work is compartmentalized.

The global project manager faces challenges in trying to create a high-performing team. There are few opportunities for the informal conversations that help build team cohesion. It takes longer to develop trust. The lack of face-to-face conversations make conflicts even worse. Team members can isolate themselves, hiding behind their computer screens, refusing to answer calls or respond to emails. It is more difficult to monitor progress, coordinate work, and reach consensus. Since team members often have to deal with demands on their team from local commitments, there often is frustration with teammates who lack commitment or fail to take on their fair share of the work.

## Distance Adds to Uncertainty

Managing a virtual team can be viewed as an opportunity or a threat. Even a co-located team with poorly defined processes for the division of tasks among team members, coordination of effort, and communication will fail. Distance only adds to the risk. Problems encountered with the performance of technical work include:

- **Time:** Teams based in different locations usually take longer to accomplish the work, due to delays in coordination between team members and not knowing where to find information.
- **Environment:** Virtual teams are unaware of organizational changes happening in a remote location that could affect accomplishing the work and implementation of the solution.
- **Requirements gathering:** Language barriers affect the accuracy and completeness of requirements, and there is also a need for technical support in multiple locations.

## How Can Global Project Managers Enhance Their Competencies?

The Project Management Institute (PMI®) has developed a Project Manager Competency Development Framework (PMDCF) consisting of three dimensions:

- **Knowledge:** what the project manager knows about project management, for example, passing the PMP® certification exam
- **Performance:** the application of project management knowledge to real-world situations (risk management, budgeting, etc.)
- **Personal:** the project manager's behavior when managing the project, such as communication skills and leadership

The global project manager should look for opportunities to enhance these three dimensions in the areas of cultural intelligence, overcoming distance, and managing uncertainty.

## Cultural Intelligence

The first step is to acknowledge that cultural differences exist, and assess the team's ability to deal with those differences. If you have only worked in one culture, it is difficult to perceive that there are cultural differences, and how great the divide can be. Several questions to ask about the project manager and team's cultural intelligence include:

- Are they "blissfully unaware" that cultural differences exist?
- Do they use simple rules to accommodate cultural differences?
- Have they gained a deeper understanding of culture and consciously adapted their behaviour accordingly?
- Can they adapt to culture on a subconscious level? Do they know which behaviors are appropriate without giving much thought?

As a project manager, assess your own and your individual team members' level of cultural intelligence. Then learn more about the cultural differences and provide training and information to the team members about the differences and how to leverage them. A good starting point is Hofstede's six-dimensional model of cultural dimensions. Work with the team to determine how cultural differences will be incorporated into team processes. Finally, educate team members on the new processes so there is consistency of performance.

## Using Culture to Deal with Conflict

On a virtual team, conflict has three aspects: the content of the conflict, the relationships between the parties, and the clash of cultures. Cultural differences create new expectations on behaviors of the parties involved. A small disagreement over content can be magnified by cultural differences. Even when the content and relational aspects have been resolved, the cultural dimension of conflict can still remain.

When dealing with conflict, a first step is to understand culture's contribution to the problem, and to the process used to resolve the conflict. Try to understand how the cultural perception of the other party's behavior contributes to the conflict. And how the other party's culture would deal with the conflict.

In negotiating, there are five styles of conflict resolution that are typically used:

1. Problem solving and creating a win-win solution
2. Competing to create a win for one's side and a loss for the other side
3. Comprising to create a short-term solution
4. Avoiding and withdrawing from the problem
5. Smoothing and letting the other party gain so the conflict can be removed

Typically, the conflict resolution style preferred by just one culture will become the norm for the entire organization. On a global project, the team needs to be sensitive to the norms of other cultures. For example, compared to other cultures, Americans use the competitive style. In Japan, China, and Korea, there is a tendency to use avoiding, since it gives the other party an opportunity to save face.

In different cultures, there is different emphasis placed on product, process, and relationships. People who speak specifically about problems and practical solutions feel frustrated when dealing with people who focus on the big picture, processes, and people's feelings. Neither side is correct, it is just a different perspective on the conflict and how to address it. The project manager should discuss with each team member how they can improve conflict resolution with people from different cultures.

## Overcoming Distance

### Create an Environment of Trust

A trusting environment has three dimensions: the virtual team members have to trust the project manager, they have to trust the organization, and trust each other. To create this environment, the project manager needs to take the first step, demonstrating trust in the team members. This means asking for their advice and empowering them to implement good solutions. As you show trust, the team members will reciprocate. Getting your team face to face will also enable them to develop deeper relationships than can be created through phone calls and emails. When I worked at PricewaterhouseCoopers, I had a program manager role in the US, and would coordinate work with my counterparts in Europe and Asia. For several months, we communicated through conference calls, and emails. But it was not until we all met in one place that we developed a trusting relationship. Be sure to treat everyone equally, no matter the distance. Take additional steps to involve team members who are more distant. Address high and low performance immediately and fairly, no matter where it happens. As the project progresses, follow up with the team members to check if they are doing what they said they would—following procedures, responding to voice messages and emails promptly, etc.

## Connect the Team Members

Virtual team members feel isolated. At the beginning of a project, try to bring the entire team together for face-to-face kickoff meetings. If this is not possible, try using video conferencing. If that's still not possible, then the project manager should travel to meet the team members. Provide opportunities for team members to get to know each other. This can include a directory with team member profiles: their subject matter expertise and personal aspects. Have your team members organize themselves into small workgroups, say two to three people. Document this in a responsibility assignment matrix (RAM). Also provide highly visible rewards for outstanding contributions to the team. Even small rewards given publicly can motivate team members.

## Share a Clear Vision for the Project

A vision provides direction and motivation for the team. The reason for the project, whether driven by threat or opportunity, is instilled within the team and shared through data and demonstration. Team members need to understand why the project is important. You want to bring resistance to the surface and address it. The desired outcome of the project should be clear and widely understood. As the project manager, you want to:

- Tell a compelling story about the need for the project
- Ensure team members are committed to it
- Identify what values will be important, what values need to change
- Display your passion and energy
- Create excitement among the team members
- Make sure everyone understands the priority of the work
- Identify the new opportunities that will be created for team members
- Gain commitment from team members to develop their own skills (such as cultural intelligence)

## Improve Communication

Poor communication can lower the productivity of the virtual team and slow down a project's progress. The project manager needs to make sure that communication is both effective and efficient. Improve your project management communication plan by including:

- More frequent verbal communication, including more face-to-face meetings
- Time at the beginning of meetings to build social relationships
- Checkpoints during meetings to ensure all team members are engaged
- Information distribution before meetings enabling idea generation prior to the meeting
- Online services for web conferencing, syncing files, and tracking errors
- Electronic discussion boards that enable constructive feedback
- Training on communication and interpersonal skills, especially the use of communication technology and the implication of culture on language

## Managing Uncertainty

Monitoring progress and paying more attention to team norms, lessons learned, and leadership will help lessen the uncertainty on global projects.

### Create a Team Charter

At project launch, act as a facilitator and help the team members define the team processes, ground rules, and norms they will use to govern themselves. Ensure that new team members are committed to live by the charter. The team charter can include:

- **SMART objectives:** Make sure everyone understands the project objectives.
- **Clearly defined roles and responsibilities:** Effective teams have a core group that rarely changes over the project.
- **Chain of command:** Define authority levels for decision-making and span of control.

- **Team membership:** Working virtually, smaller teams are more efficient.
- **Work hours:** Schedule overlapping work periods to increase real-time communication.
- **Meetings:** Factor in time differences so the inconvenience is spread equally.
- **Team building:** Identify opportunities for team members to develop skills and share their common interests.
- **Rewards and recognition:** Create virtual award ceremonies. Inform local supervisors about members' contributions.
- **Leveraging diversity:** Create a team directory listing members' expertise and skills. Create virtual sub-teams pairing members from distant locations.

## Capture Lessons Learned

In a virtual environment, it is more difficult to capture and share productivity gains. Hold more frequent lessons learned sessions to identify what the team does well and areas for improvement. Have an ongoing training program to address skill gaps. Ask the more senior members of the team to mentor junior members. Also evaluate the level of teamwork: Are there power struggles? Can the group reach a consensus? Is there open discussion of ideas? Who offers or rejects ideas more often? Are feelings and emotions freely expressed? Are all team members engaged? Are team members bored, excited, defensive, or hostile?

## Promote Self-Leadership

Distance and cultural diversity make it difficult for one project manager to make sure the team is effective. Identify mature team leaders in each location. Train the team leaders and team members to be more self-sufficient.

## Monitor Progress

The project manager cannot simply walk over to a team member's desk to have a chat. This shifts more responsibility on team members. Work with the team members to set goals and create more frequent interim deliverables and checkpoints to measure progress. Use asynchronous technology to capture discussion threads and document posting in the project knowledge base. Explicitly measure progress and make it visible to all team members. Provide frequent reports to the local supervisors of team members.

## Conclusion

Good global project managers develop their own competencies, and those of their team members. We can use technology to bridge distance, but also focus on the human aspects of culture, work habits, management style, English as a mandated language, communication, and uncertainty. Perform a self-assessment and assess your team members, then look for on-the-job and other improvement opportunities. A good way to learn more about how to overcome these challenges is to become involved in the international community.

## References

Hofstede, Geert, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.

Neeley, Tsedal B., Pamela J. Hinds, and Catherine D. Cramton. "The (Un)Hidden Turmoil of Language in Global Collaboration." *Organizational Dynamics* 41, no. 3 (2012): 236–44.

Lipnack, Jessica, and Jeffrey Stamps. *Virtual Teams: People Working Across Boundaries with Technology*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000.

Siebdrat, Frank, Martin Hoegl, and Holger Ernst. "How to Manage Virtual Teams." *MIT Sloan Management Review* 50, no. 4 (2009): 63-68.



## Learn More

Learn more about how you can improve productivity, enhance efficiency, and sharpen your competitive edge through training.

[Managing Global Projects](#)

[Leading Virtual and Remote Teams](#)

[Virtual Project Management](#)

[Coaching from a Distance: Developing Your Team When You Can't Be Face to Face](#)

[Project Management, Leadership, and Communication](#)

Visit [www.globalknowledge.com](http://www.globalknowledge.com) or call **1-800-COURSES (1-800-268-7737)** to speak with a Global Knowledge training advisor.

## About the Author

Tom Grzesiak is the founder of Supple Wisdom LLC, a project management consulting firm based in Tampa, FL. Previously, Tom was the global program manager at IBM leading the development of internal project management resources. He also worked at PricewaterhouseCoopers where he managed projects in the based in the US, Denmark, and Ireland.