

Managing Multicultural Construction Teams in today's Complex Global Environment

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The rapid globalisation of the world's economy has had significant impact on the way construction project managers work, bringing them frequently with clients, suppliers and peer that they never work before. In an era of globalisation, projects in the construction industry face unique challenges in coordinating among clients, financiers, developers, designers and contractors from different countries. In addition, construction project teams need to cope with the complexities of both local institutions and physical environments. Bartlett and Gosha [1] discussed the challenges facing organisations, which are intending to work effectively across borders. They identified the major challenges as being able to develop practices, which balance global competitiveness, multinational flexibility and the building of a worldwide learning capability. They maintained that achieving this balance will require organisations to develop the cultural sensitivity and ability to manage and leverage learning to build future capabilities. While offering opportunities, globalisation also poses significant challenges for construction project managers especially when different cultures are involved as a team. Multicultural construction project teams have their culture as a set of shared values and beliefs. Beliefs are people's perceptions of how things are done in their countries. They are reported as "practices" in a particular culture. Values are people's perceptions about the way things should be done. They are their preferred practices and people's beliefs. In a global context the management and development of people inevitably leads to considerations of diversity and related challenges.

It is worth noting that the global construction industry has been under pressure to evolve into a sector that is constantly changing to fit the needs of the broader context in which the operations are executed. Attitudes towards working have changed dramatically in recent years and there is currently much more emphasis on multi-cultural team working. As global construction organisations define more of their activities as projects, the demand for multi-cultural team working grows, and there is increasing interest in reforming the project delivery process. For global construction organisations there is an increasing need to get groups of project managers from different nationalities to work together effectively either as enduring management teams or to resource specific projects addressing key business issues. Many global construction organisations have found that bringing such groups of project managers together can be problematic and performance is not always at the level required or expected. In addressing the issues relating to developing effective multicultural construction project teams it appears that the following areas should be well thought-out: communication techniques, smoothness of handover, teamwork, issue resolution, joint decision making, people selection and prioritisation. The cultural weight that each contractor brings to a project is more often than not unconscious. Part of our culture may be conscious and explainable to others. However, few of us are completely aware of how our actions and ways of thinking are dictated by more hidden or in fact unconscious values. For example, attitudes towards authority, approaches to carrying out task, concern for efficiency, communication patterns, and learning styles. It is significant that, cultural norms and values are passed on from generation to generation. No one culture is right and another wrong but within each cultural grouping, whether

organisational or ethnic, there is a shared view of what is considered right or wrong, logical and illogical, fair and unfair. These norms do affect the ways project teams communicate and behave within project environments. Based on the studies of Hall [2], Hofstede [3], the human interaction does not occur in a vacuum or isolation. Instead it takes place in a social environment governed by a complex set of formal and informal values, norms, rules, codes of conduct, laws and regulations, policies and as well as in a variety of organisations. Shaping as well as being shaped by these governing mechanisms is something that we are used to refer as culture. Cultures materialise and evolve in response to social cravings for answers to a set of problems common to all groups [4]. In order to survive and to exist as a social identity, every project group regardless of its size has to come with solutions to these problems.

The growing trend in engineering design and construction is giving rise to a need for the development of effective multicultural teams. Now that construction companies are able to move resources to almost any location worldwide and have the capacity to work on a global scale; for many organisations future opportunities to work entails thinking more clearly about cross-cultural issues and more overtly and systematically an understanding of multicultural team working. Although much can be achieved by working with multicultural teams, the truly successful construction firms are likely to be those, which embed the change through integrated changes to cross-cultural team selection, joint decision making, communication, teamwork, effective people selection and project selection. What does this mean for project leaders and international construction organisations? They must actively promote multicultural team working as the means of addressing poor performance on people management and cultural issues on construction projects. In particular, if organisational change is to be effectively introduced in developing countries, multinational construction organisations will have to ensure that their key decisions are being informed by the knowledge and experience of local or indigenous managers. This will require construction project leaders to have a better understanding of cultural change processes and procedures in developing countries. The proposed strategies present a better way of optimising the performance of project-based operations thus enabling construction organisations to reform their poor performance on projects and empower them to better manage emerging culture challenges in their future projects. In spite of the current difficulties the industry faces, there is an increasing

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need to get multicultural construction project teams from different nationalities to work together effectively.

Many construction organisations have found that multicultural team integration can be problematic and at times performance is not always at the level required or expected. With an ongoing increase of multicultural construction project teams, project leaders in multinational construction organisations must be aware of cultural diversity issues in order to function effectively and achieve high levels of team performance. It is crucial for the construction research community to strengthen the debatable assumption that culture is an organisational variable, which is subject to conscious manipulation. A more nuanced understanding of construction culture and recognition

that it is mutually comprised with its structure are required if cultural complexity is to be accurately understood and responded to.

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