


 Published in Big Ideas



Texas McCombs

Aug 16, 2017 · 4 min read ·  Listen



# Navigating Work Overseas with More Confidence, Fewer Gaffes

An expert offers three strategies for succeeding in cross-cultural work projects, because making it in a foreign job assignment takes more than good intentions.

By *Deirdre Mendez*




An international assignment in Bangalore sounded like a great opportunity for Paul to prove his management skills to his employer, a global enterprise. He was determined to show he could handle the challenge.

Within days, though, he had already misstepped by scheduling a regional business meeting right in the middle of a major Indian holiday. “I discovered the mistake too late to reschedule,” he says, “and I couldn’t believe my Indian staff hadn’t notified me of the conflict.”



Get unlimited access

 Search




Texas McCombs

2.6K Followers

News, business research, and ideas from the McCombs School of Business at The University of Texas at Austin. Learn more at [www.mcombs.utexas.edu](http://www.mcombs.utexas.edu)

[Edit profile](#)

### More from Medium

 Zu Hui Yap, M.Ed


**Seniority is Overrated, Focus on Competence...**



 Vartika Kashyap

**Want To Become A Great Manager? Stop Managing...**



 Tavia... in DataD...

**How the Best Leaders Inspire Their Teams**



Paul painfully experienced what so many expat business leaders know: succeeding in a foreign job assignment takes more than good intentions. My work facilitating international business relationships over the last 30 years has helped me identify three ways to be more successful in cross-culture work projects.

**Create a new, goal-based culture. Favoring one partner's cultural approach over another leads to resentment and conflict.**

International projects raise a complex issue: whose culture to prioritize? Should headquarters' culture reign in an overseas subsidiary? Would local practices be more effective in a foreign sales office? Should a customer expect global suppliers to conform to its cultural norms?

These are the wrong questions to ask. A cross-border project requires a new and unique culture of its own. All partners' methods should be modified to create a project-specific culture, addressing its objectives and conforming to its constraints.

Detailed discussions of intentions for an international project can uncover major differences in expectations. Basic concepts like "partnership," "customer satisfaction," and "deadlines" are defined differently around the world. Agreeing on common objectives isn't easy but is vital to achieving goals.

**Do not struggle over cultural differences. Agree to use the best of both management approaches.**

Once shared project goals are established, partners should collaborate to develop joint strategies to achieve them. This process can uncover startling differences in corporate structures and policies. For Paul, the U.S. manager in India, differences in cultural perspectives on status and hierarchy led to misunderstanding:

- Companies with an Achievement orientation expect employees to show personal initiative. They reward individual accomplishment and promote top performers quickly. Achievement partners focus on results and are good at propelling projects rapidly towards their objectives.
- Endowment-oriented counterparts value hierarchy and expect employees to defer to their superiors' judgment. They promote loyal employees based on seniority. Endowment managers offer big-picture perspective and long-term thinking, carried out by a clearly structured chain of command.

These contrasting approaches can complement one another if managers are willing to integrate the benefits of hard-driving vigor with respect for hierarchy in a highly productive synergistic project culture.

Paul's misstep in scheduling a business meeting during a national holiday was caused in part because his local employees (Endowment-oriented) felt uncomfortable pointing it out. It wasn't their place to criticize a superior's plan, and doing so might be taken as an insult. In subsequent interactions, he helped them understand that he appreciated information that helped him make better decisions. That became part of their project culture.



### **Design policies and reward systems to match your goals.**

As they identify differences in their corporate cultures, partners can modify their policies, systems, and processes — guided by the constraints and desired outcomes — to work together smoothly. For example, if a U.S. customer and its Endowment-oriented supplier agree that it's beneficial for the customer to receive ongoing input from the supplier's employees, they can develop policies and reward systems that encourage Endowment representatives to report concerns and problems more actively. At the same time, recognizing Endowment employees' reluctance to criticize their superiors can help Achievement managers develop culturally appropriate strategies, like requesting input before plans are developed.

Basing a project's culture on its goals — rather than any partner's preferences — minimizes resentment and provides a clear basis for making decisions and resolving conflicts. Involving all parties in developing strategies allows each to contribute its unique expertise and aligns policies and procedures with the project's objectives.

“Gradually, my local team and I learned to appreciate the opportunities that our differences created,” admits Paul. “We all knew that we cared about the project, and being on the same page allowed us to thrive and have fun together.”

*Deirdre Mendez will be discussing intercultural communication as part of the Texas Enterprise Speaker Series on Friday, September 22, 2017. [Learn more or register today.](#)*

*Originally published at [www.texasenterprise.utexas.edu](http://www.texasenterprise.utexas.edu) on August 17, 2017.*

**Navigating Work Overseas with More Confidence, Fewer Gaffes | Texas Enterprise**

An international assignment in Bangalore sounded like a great opportunity for Paul to prove his management skills to...

[www.texasenterprise.utexas.edu](http://www.texasenterprise.utexas.edu)

Some rights reserved 