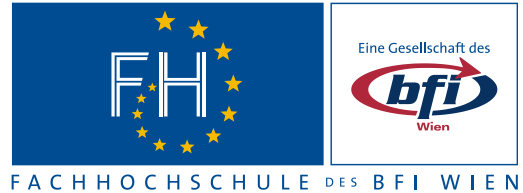


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The Strategic Importance of Intercultural Competency for Project Managers in the 21st Century

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Abstract

With an increasing number and importance of international projects, it is important that challenges and opportunities arising from cultural diversity in projects are identified. This paper looks at cultural issues from a project management perspective, analyses the impact culture has on the triple constraints of scope, schedule, and cost, as well as into the nine project management knowledge areas (project integration management, scope management, time management, cost management, quality management, human resources management, communications management, risk management, and procurement management). Finally, I focus on some existing knowledge frameworks that could be adapted to the strategic development of specific intercultural competence for project managers in terms of content, methods, and trainer resources.

1. Globalization and Project Management: Two Trends

Globalization is currently driven by continuing advances in the information technology segment (WTO 2008). The number of internet users is approaching 2.5bn and one third of the world's population (Eurostat 2012). Political changes, such as the enlargement of the European Union, allow for free trade within large regions. There is a general trend for increasing international trade cooperation and a more integrated world economy (WTO 2011). A recent example is the signing of free trade agreements between the European Union and the countries of Colombia and Peru, which took place in June 2012 (Financial Times 2012). While each WTO member state is a party to an average of 13 preferential trade agreements, a mere 16% of all merchandise on a global scale are traded preferentially (WTO 2012), leaving a lot of room for growth. In Europe, free movement of persons is facilitated by the development of the Schengen Agreement and the extension of the Schengen area; the most recent expansion took place in 2008 to include Switzerland (Europa 2012).

The globalization of project management and the project management profession is following the globalization of the economy. The Project Management Institute (PMI) is pushing for internationalization of the project management profession, along with the International Organization of Standardization (ISO), who both came out with new, more international standards (Nguyen 2009). The first universities in Asia have introduced studies in project management, and it can be expected that the project management profession will gain momentum in the rapidly growing BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) countries (Nguyen 2009). Developing countries in Latin America and Africa will undoubtedly follow suit and will also start educating more project management professionals (Nguyen 2009).

The consequences of the current European and worldwide economic downturn for the project management profession are twofold. First of all, governments initiate trade incentives on a global scale, along with investments into more sustainable technologies, like large-scale renewable energy projects (Nguyen 2009). Secondly, in times of tight budgets there is even more pressure to lead projects to success, so the qualification of the project managers becomes even more crucial and important. Project teams are presently hired from anywhere in the world, depending on where skilled people are available (Raybould 2007). So even if a project takes place in a European country, the project manager might have to deal with a multicultural team. In international projects, no company or government can afford to miss their project goals on grounds of cultural differences and misunderstandings. These trends will lead to more projects being conducted on a regional or global scale, with ever increasing demands for skilled project managers.

2. Intercultural Challenges in Projects

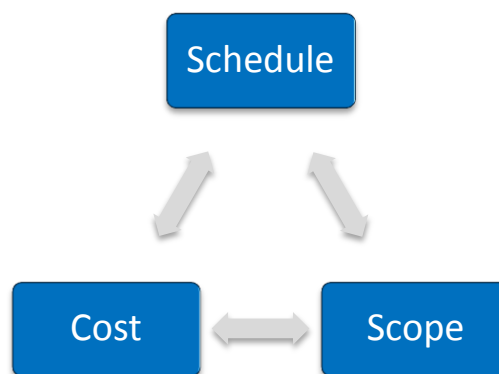
When project management meets globalization, additional dimensions of complexity have to be taken into account. An expatriate manager has to deal with one culture – that of his posting – at a time. Project managers, however, usually have to deal with a variety of cultures at the same time. The project might be set in a specific country, (maybe even the project manager's home country) or it may be part of a large program spanning across several countries; or the project team consists of members from various countries or cultures. More often than not, project managers find themselves in a situation where these aspects are combined.

The most frequent challenges project managers have to confront relate to the triple constraints of projects (schedule, cost, and scope), as well as to the different project management knowledge areas defined by the PMI¹ (PMBOK Guide 2008).

A) The impact of culture on the triple constraints

Each of the three constraint elements is subject to interpretation against a cultural background and to potential misunderstandings or disagreement within the project team, but also between the project team and other (external) stakeholders.

Figure 1:



Source: Adapted from PMBOK Guide 2008

Schedule: Different perceptions of time, such as clock time versus event time, or the notion whether time is in limited or unlimited supply, as well as differences in monochronic versus polychronic attitudes can lead to different ways of scheduling, and to different results of the scheduling process. Furthermore, there can be different understanding of the schedule as such; in some cultures, a schedule is seen as a rough orientation, in other cultures, it is taken as set in stone.

Scope: Different languages, especially when used by non-native speakers, can easily lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretation of scope items. Different attitudes towards quality can potentially lead to over or under fulfilling scope items. Relationship orientation versus goal orientation can lead to incomplete or missed scope items. Good relationships with a customer or other stakeholders could potentially lead to scope creep.

Cost: The Western attitude “time is money” does not apply around the world. There are substantial differences in the value and importance that are assigned to money. In Latin America, for example, money was not commonly used until the beginning of the 20th century (Peña & Ramalho 2012). The traditions and values that are associated with money influence the way team members from different cultures generate and

¹ PMI: Project Management Institute; www.pmi.org

treat the cost estimates, and adherence to the budget. Like the schedule, the project budget can be perceived as either a given, or a mere recommendation.

Cultural differences can further arise from the general prioritization of these constraints. For example, the saying “time is money” suggests equal value for schedule and cost. In other cultures “time is life” and the relative value of the constraints might be interpreted differently.

B) The impact of culture on the project management knowledge areas

A project manager needs to deal with *all nine areas* of project management. All these areas are influenced by cultural factors to a substantial extent, which can either be attributed to a specific country (e.g. the legal system), or to the people the project manager has to deal with (e.g. communication styles). The specific tasks project managers have to perform within all these knowledge areas - such as negotiations, conflict resolution and problem solving - all take place in a cultural context. This paragraph gives some examples of the ways in and the extent to which cultural aspects influence the project management knowledge areas.

Figure 2:



Source: Own illustration, Karin Brünneemann; adapted from PMBOK Guide 2008

Integration Management: Team members are used to different management styles, have different views towards hierarchy, and different ideas on how the project is integrated into the overall business. Stakeholders from collectivistic cultures might have different expectations as to how the project is managed overall, and team members from extremely masculine and patriarchal cultures might even have problems accepting a female project manager.

Scope Management: Acronyms, technical terms, slang, dialect, ambiguous or vague expressions might all lead to misunderstandings when reading or discussing the project scope items. Implicit assumptions² that differ across cultures are, however, by far the greatest threat to the correct interpretation of the project scope.

Time Management: Different attitudes towards time influence the scheduling process, determine the way deadlines are or are not observed. They influence whether tasks are completed sequentially or synchronically and determine if meetings take place as agreed. Holidays depend on nationality and religion, even the weekends differ between cultures (e.g. in Arab cultures the weekend is on Fridays and Saturdays, whereas Sunday is a regular working day).

Human Resource Management: The project manager needs to take into consideration whether hiring is done mainly based on qualifications or relationships, whether motivation is achieved by financial or social incentives, which attitudes team members have towards personal development and training, and which management styles are adequate. The way hierarchies are organized in certain cultures can lead to problems implementing a matrix organization.

Procurement Management: Partly based on different legal systems and traditions, negotiation cultures and contracting differ widely across cultures. Project managers therefore have to consider the form of negotiations and the formalities of contract closing. They also have to take into account that in some cultures business will only be done with friends, not with strangers.

Cost Management: Cultural differences can exist in the overall attitude towards money, in the attitude towards spending versus saving, in the perception of private versus company money, or in the understanding of buying “as cheap as possible” versus buying “value for money”. The degree to which a culture has a materialistic attitude can influence the approach to cost management.

Communications Management: Besides deciding on a common project language, the project manager needs to take into consideration how well the team members and stakeholders speak that language. Furthermore, he or she needs to decide on direct versus indirect communication, consider attitudes towards information sharing, as well as the preferred methods of communication (e.g. face-to-face versus written reports).

Quality Management: The understanding of the concept of quality can differ across cultures. In some cultures “more is better”; the project manager needs to ensure that quality is not equaled with quantity. The relationship orientation prevailing in many cultures might lead to gold plating, based on a wish to please the customer at any cost.

Risk Management: Stakeholders from different cultures might have different expectations of security, different levels of uncertainty avoidance, and different tolerance levels for ambiguity. They might see other risks than we do (e.g. non-material versus material risks) and can have a different attitude towards risk in general and, for example, see the opportunities more than the threats.

² A very simple example to illustrate such different implicit cultural assumptions: When Europeans order food in a restaurant, they implicitly assume that the food is served on a plate and that they will get some cutlery to eat it (without explicitly ordering these items). If Chinese order food in a restaurant, they will implicitly assume that the food is served in a bowl and that they will get chopsticks to eat it.

3. Strategic Development of Intercultural Competencies for Project Managers

Some of the main reasons for the failure of international projects are the project manager's lack of competencies for securely moving in intercultural environments and the deficit of awareness of their own cultural background (Simkhovych 2009). With an increasing number of global projects, human resource management departments will have to start embedding intercultural considerations into their recruiting process, as well as strategically develop their workforce in a way they cannot only deal with, but profit from internationalisation. A basic training session, teaching the dos and taboos in a specific country will not do (Earley & Mosakowski 2004), since project managers often have to deal with a great variety of cultures in their projects. Therefore, they need to gain insight into cultural concepts and develop a general cultural sensitivity. "Cultural intelligence is related to emotional intelligence, but it picks up where emotional intelligence leaves off." (Earley & Mosakowski 2004: 139).

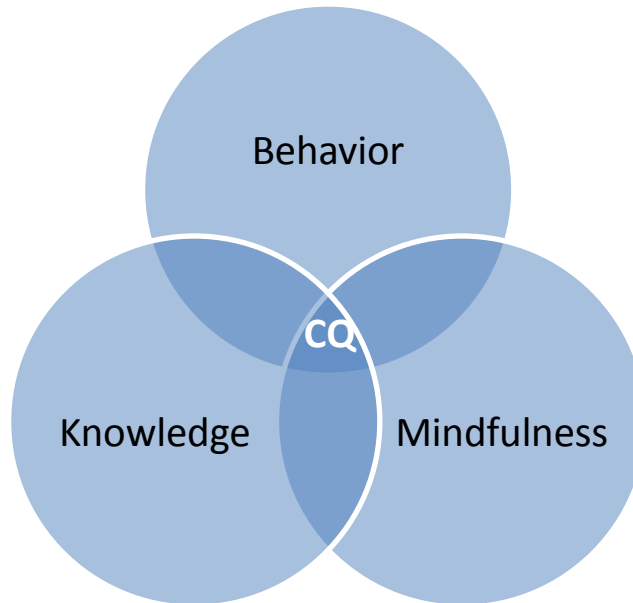
When planning for strategic development of intercultural project management competences, human resource managers need to consider the content of such trainings, the training methods, and the availability of qualified trainers.

4. Content – which skills are important in intercultural project management?

A search on the internet for "intercultural competence" and its synonyms brings up tens of thousands of hits. On the other hand, there is next to no literature about the specific knowledge a project manager needs in mixed cultural teams, and if so, the recommendations for skills development are either not the main topic of the work (e.g. Ranf 2010) or they deal with the comparison of two specific cultures (e.g. Ochieng & Price 2009).

Thomas (2006) offers a basic model of a "Culture Intelligence Quotient" CQ, which is found at the intersection of behavioural skills, knowledge, and mindfulness. He claims that the ability to adapt is essential for the ability to shape intercultural interactions.

Figure 3:



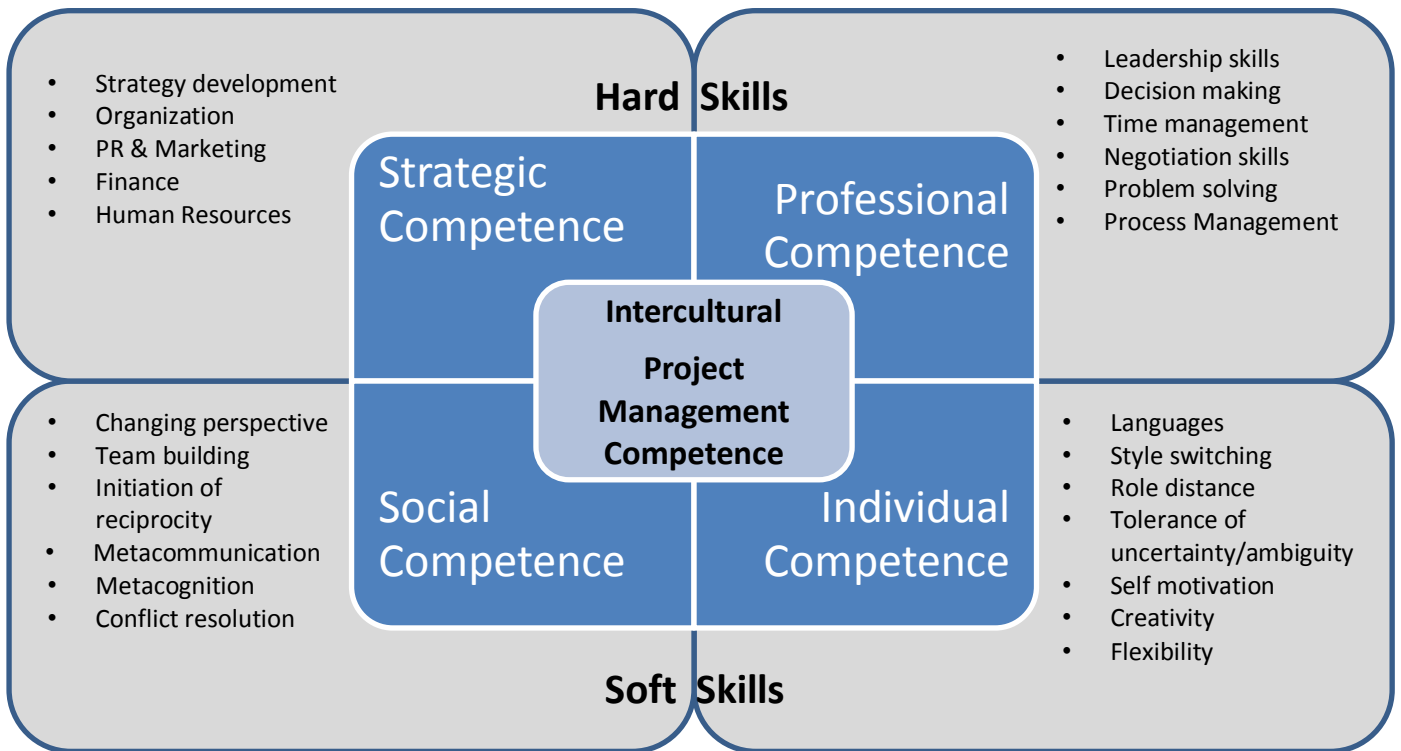
Source: Thomas 2006: 81

Note: CQ stands for "Cultural Intelligence"

In this model, *knowledge* refers to familiarity with one's own culture, and to awareness about cultural differences; it encompasses content and process knowledge, as well as cognitive and motivational influences (Thomas 2006). *Mindfulness* relates a heightened awareness to the reality of self, others and context in intercultural settings; *Behavior* means the ability to develop and adjust one's behaviour adequately within cultural settings, keeping in mind both the target culture(s) as well as one's own expectations (Thomas 2006). While such cultural intelligence is certainly necessary to manage an international project team, a more meticulous model is needed to refine the specific target skills of a global project manager.

Bolten (2007) offers a much more exhaustive approach and explains intercultural competence as a framework of four essential competences: Strategic and professional competence (hard skills) and social and individual competence (soft skills); these four competences in turn are based on specific skills sets. This model, with some adaption, can serve as a basis for the identification of an "Intercultural Project Management Competence".

Figure 4:



Source: Adapted from Bolten 2007: 214

I would like to expand a bit on some of these strategically important skills and competences and discuss some aspects that are often overlooked in the management of multicultural project teams.

Language skills: Language does not only serve the purpose of communication, but is closely tied to cultural understanding (Matsumoto & Juang 2012). School English usually does not suffice; fluent business English is a minimum requirement. The project manager should, however, be aware that there are substantial differences between variations of the English language across countries and continents (Bolten 2007). Any additional foreign language a project manager speaks is an asset – both in terms of linguistic and cultural understanding. And even if we are familiar with the literal translation of some words, we might not entirely grasp their meanings. As many of us have already experienced, a Chinese *yes* means “I have heard what you said” rather than “I agree with you”, and a Latin American *mañana* might just be a very polite “no”. We should also bear in mind that all aspects of language – verbal, nonverbal, paraverbal and extraverbal³ – vary considerably between cultures (Bolten 2007).

Cultural metacognition (thinking about our thinking): Managers involved in international endeavours need to be aware of and reflect their own ways of thinking and their own cultural assumptions, as well as those of their team members (Chua/Morris/Mor 2012). “I often compare it to the heightened awareness you have when driving in a foreign city, where you will pay more attention to the road signs and traffic signs. It's this kind of heightened awareness and reflection about what I think about other cultures and how other cultures think about me that helps cross-cultural creative collaboration.” (Roy Y.J. Chua, cited by Blanding 2012).

³ For detailed information on these four aspects of language see Bolten 2007.

Using cultural metacognition, the project manager can detect and clarify misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

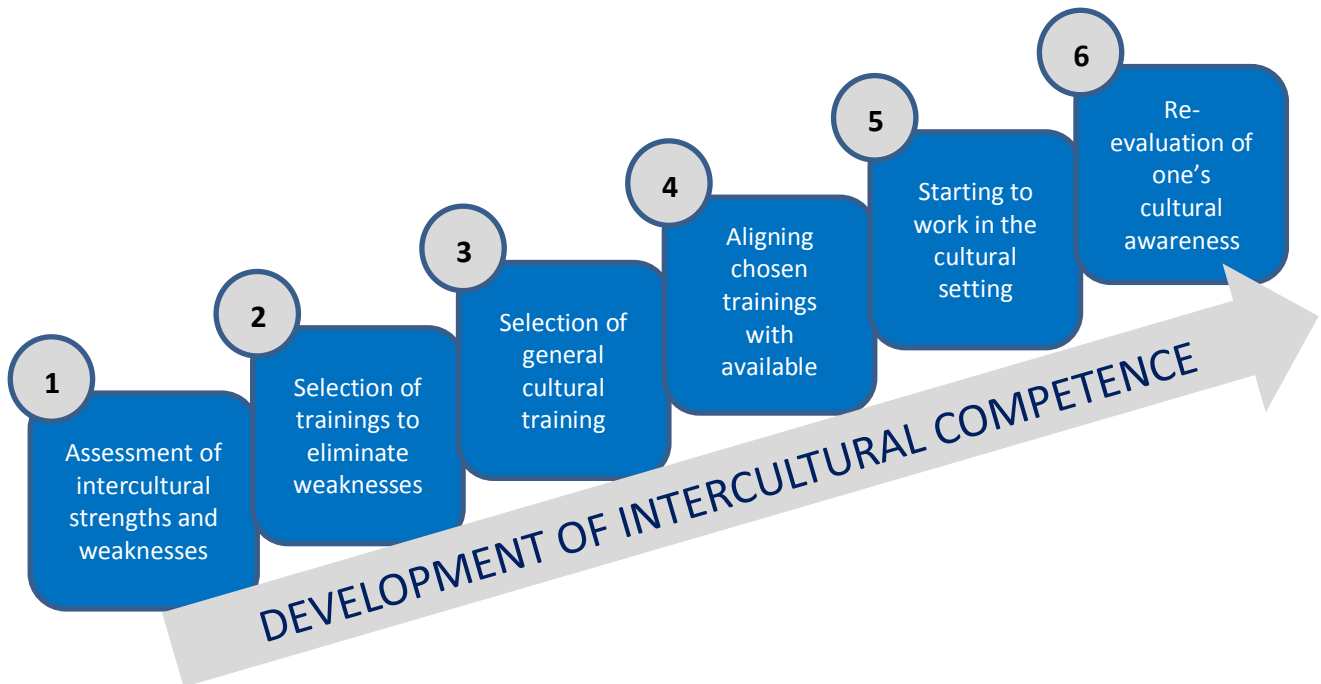
Switching management styles: The management style most of us have learned in a Western university or business school might not work in a (partly) non-Western work environment. Project managers should, therefore, be aware of and learn about other management styles such as the Japanese or the Latin American style (see e.g. Peña/Ramalho 2012 on Latin America, or Wood 1989 on Japan). Management styles differ, for example, in the expectations a team member has towards the project manager or in the way the team can be motivated, but also in the way the team as such functions and cooperates.

Conflict resolution: Conflicts will inevitably arise in any project, being about resources, opinions or other issues. However, the approach to addressing and resolving conflicts differs across cultures. In some cultures (e.g. German culture), disagreement can be stated openly and in public; in a more relationship oriented culture (e.g. Latin America) this would be considered offensive. Furthermore, the project manager needs to consider whom to involve in a conflict solving process and how to approach a solution, since this also depends on culture.

5. Methods – How to build up intercultural competence

Earley and Mosakowski (2004) suggest a six step process to strategically enhance a manager's cultural competence: (1) assessment of intercultural strengths and weaknesses; (2) selection of appropriate trainings to eliminate weaknesses; (3) selection of general cultural training; (4) aligning the chosen trainings with the available resources; (5) starting to work in the cultural setting; and (6) re-evaluation of one's cultural awareness.

Figure 5:



Source: Own illustration, Karin Brünemann; data adapted from Earley/Mosakowski 2004

Such a process needs to be carefully timed; ideally, it starts some time *before* a concrete international project, in order to provide the project manager with some basic theoretical, off-the-job preparation; then stretches into a concrete project, in order to accompany the project manager with advanced on-the-job training and coaching in everyday work situations.

Strategies for the development of intercultural competence for project managers need to consider the following aspects:

- Training versus coaching
- On-the-job versus off-the-job training
- Individual versus team training
- Culture-specific versus general cultural sensitivity training
- Conventional training versus e-learning
- Distributive versus collaborative training methods

These aspects of intercultural training should not be understood as mutually exclusive, but should instead be combined into a training strategy mix. Since cultures change over time, it is very important to keep one's skills updated. This can be in the form of regular "refresher" trainings, or by frequently discussing culture, reading about it, or interacting with people from different cultures (Youker 2004).

A model for the enhancement of intercultural competence catering for the specific needs of global project managers could include the following components:

Figure 6:



Source: Adapted from Bolten (2007: 223)

6. Resources – who should conduct the training?

If an organization does not have sufficient own resources to plan and execute the strategic development of intercultural competences for their project managers, it might be difficult to find a suitable training provider. One issue is that anyone can call himself or herself “project manager” or “intercultural trainer”. There are some widely recognized certifications available for project managers, for example *Project Management Professional (PMP®)*, which is awarded by the Project Management Institute (www.pmi.org). However, the holder of such a certificate is not necessarily a qualified trainer. Certificates for intercultural trainers are not as generally recognized but exist, nevertheless. For example, the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena and www.interculture.de have jointly developed a one-year study program, awarding their students a university certificate “Intercultural Trainer”. However, the biggest challenge might be to encounter someone who is both an experienced project manager *and* intercultural trainer.

7. Discussion and Outlook

Considering the number and importance of international projects, there is surprisingly little literature on the specific subject of intercultural project management competence. Further research is certainly needed into

the exact ways culture influences the management of projects, which of the cultural factors are most influential, and how specific cultural differences can be employed to achieve better results in international projects. For example, in the knowledge area of project risk management, the application of different cultural viewpoints can lead to a more complete identification of both threats and opportunities and also generate alternative approaches for risk mitigation. We also need to integrate cultural frameworks, for example Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede/Hofstede/Minkov 2010), into the existing project management frameworks.

The findings of such specific research should be integrated into the existing project management standards, methods, and best practices. In the academic field, intercultural project management competences should be incorporated into the syllabi of project management studies, intercultural studies, international management studies, human resource management studies, and related programs. In the practice of strategic human resource management, intercultural aspects should be considered in both a company's hiring processes and in the development of employed project managers.

Matsumoto and Juang once stated "Our ignorance of languages other than English, and the unfortunate ethnocentrism that often accompanies this ignorance, may be the root of our future downfall" (Matsumoto/Juang 2012: 260). They refer to business in the United States of America, but their statement might hold just as true for other countries, as well as for organizations, project teams, or even individuals.

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