"How we are and how they see us" *

International Projects in and with Latin America
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Abstract

Every project manager with international experience knows about the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of working with people from other countries and cultures. More often than not the unexpected becomes the norm. (See exhibit 1)

There is a particular stereotype about the Latin American business style. This view is somewhat based on reality but it leaves out the reasons behind the behaviors which form it. As we will see in this paper all the components of this "style" are consequences of the Latin American environment.

As citizens of this fascinating region we, Latin Americans, do not always understand why we fail to meet the Western European or United States' operating standards. We are not quite sure if those standards would lead us to success in our own countries. Nevertheless, our education and the economical and geopolitical global realities put us in a position to copy those models.

This work intends to move the veil of stereotypes to allow us to see what we do well, even better than others, and what we should change to be better project managers in this ever more global world.
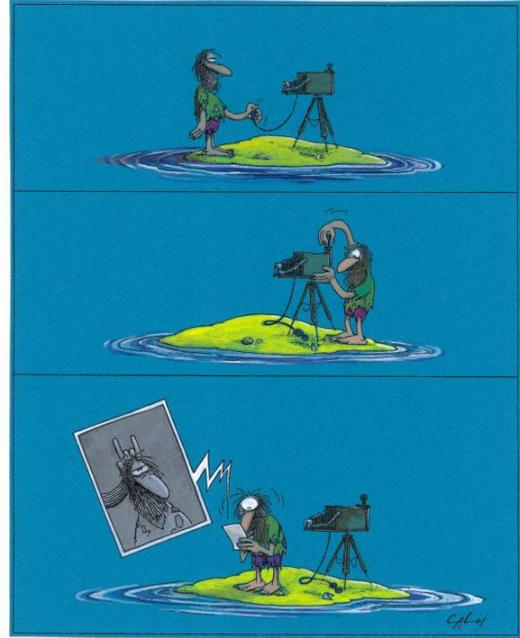
Exhibit 1: Comic by Caloi
Source www.caloi.com

Introduction

Talking and generalizing about Latin America is like doing the same thing about Europe, as if it was a homogeneous group. Generalizations are of little value even within the borders on one country. In this paper we will use generalizations as ways to express some commonly found events and behaviors but not as absolutes.

We Latin-Americans have a different set of skills that are neither better nor worse than those of other cultures but with intrinsic value. Our skills and capacities are useful in certain circumstances: our circumstances. We need to learn how to show others the hidden benefits of working with Latin American professionals. Our talents are very useful in the project management community but they are often overlooked. We need to first find out about them ourselves and then let the world appreciate them.

Methodology

Questionnaire

This paper is not based on a scientific study; however it is based on a consistent effort that began in Buenos Aires in 2002. This is the fourth time this format is used. The first time was in the PMI Buenos Aires, Argentina chapter in August 2002 under the title "Particular Challenges for international Projects". The second time was in the North

Carolina PMI Chapter, USA in August 2003 called "International projects with Latin America". Later it was presented in the Europe, Middle East and Africa Global Congress in Prague in April 2004 with the same title.

This time, in Buenos Aires, the conference is approached from the Latin American standpoint. We explain our behavior, how it is perceived and the effect it has in our projects. The goal is to manage the cultural differences and not suffer from them. These differences are unavoidable but can be used productively to be successful in our projects. Today most Latin American organizations deal with foreigners in one capacity or another.

People that planned to attend the conference completed the questionnaire at the following link: www.2americas.com/events/news001.htm.

The questionnaire presented to the attendees in each occasion is the same except for necessary variations in question number 1 showed in exhibit 2.

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1. a. Have you ever worked in a Project with people from Latin America? (Europe, Middle East & Africa 2004)
   b. Have you ever worked in a Project with people form the Hispanic Community and/or Latin America? (NC, USA August 2003)
   c. Have you ever worked in a Multinational Project? (Buenos Aires, in Spanish Aug 2002 & Nov 2004)
2. Who was the owner of the project? From what country/culture?
3. Please enumerate the 3 obstacles you had to deal with that you consider culturally rooted. Name the country of origin of the people if you consider it of relevance.
4. How did you solve these issues?
5. Where there any unsolved issues or issues you could not consistently address with PM tools? Please describe them and your approaches to solve them.

Exhibit 2: questionnaire used to gather information in different PMI events

As the answers vary depending on the target audience the conferences are never the same. Not only are different issues selected for discussion but the approaches to them are also different to make the solutions applicable immediately in the work-place of the specific audience.

Most** Reported Challenges for Latin Americans

- Lack of resources
  – Because local costs are not well known by foreigners
  – The same level of training is expected from the Latin American team without providing funds for their training
- Ignorance (from the non-local people) about
  – Local necessary tools
  – Local problems
  – Local expectations and motivations
  – Local costs and timelines
  – Local bureaucracy
  – What they do not know
  – Rivalry within Latin American Countries
- Noisy communications caused by several factors
  – Language
  – Strong prejudice about "the others" leaves little room for team development. Prejudice can be rooted in country of origin, culture, class, gender, etc.)
  – Differences in the professional jargons
  – Misunderstandings about codes, assumptions, expectations, etc. (Yes can mean: yes I understand or yes I agree or yes I will do it, etc.)
  – Class consciousness and relationship with authority
  – As a tool to create an obstacle or an excuse when it is really something else what is failing

- Unexpected time Management concepts
  - We always feel "the others" mismanage time or manage it in an unrealistic way
  - Schedule relevance
    - Beginning and ending times of meetings
    - Beginning and ending of the work day and work week
- Information Management
  - Partial or incomplete representations
  - Biased descriptions to save face
- Goal Alignment
  - Projects are abandoned once the private agenda is achieved
  - Low priority for Latin American Projects
  - Irrelevant approach to the sale and the motivation of local people in projects
- Planning, follow-up and control done at different levels
  - Informality Vs. formality
  - Several parallel plans accounting for possible scenarios a, b or c
  - Lack of accountability (there is no exact word in Spanish for "accountability")
  - Informal power overrides everything agreed upon
  - Levels of Analysis: necessary vs. excessive
  - Disorganized meetings that do not achieve their goals (did they all have the same goals?)
- Mistrust
  - In the foreign PM
  - In the Project Goal
- Different work styles
  - Choice of tools to perform the work even in the same team
  - Management techniques
  - Motivation techniques
  - Political styles within organizations

Many of these challenges derive from the fact that the cultural, social, political and business environments are different in Latin America. Let's go through some fundamental differences.

Note from the author: For more information on the issues reported by people in Europe and the USA about challenges in projects in and with Latin America, refer to Crosby, M. (2004, April). *International Projects with Latin America*. Paper presented at PMI Global Congress 2004 - Prague, Prague, Czech Republic

** There where other reported challenges which I think had more to do with personality traits of the individuals' involved than with cultural differences.

Instability vs. Stability

It is easy to credit the outcome of a project to the performance of the project manager and the team in a stable environment where most assumptions used for planning happen as expected. It is harder to take responsibility for the outcomes when the environment is unstable because the results may or may not be attributed to the PM and team's work. If the PM or the team are inept the project will most likely fail. However, even if they are very skilled and hardworking, changes in the environment may cause the project to fail. In the face of this type of failure people outside the team react negatively to the team and do not care to find out the root cause of it. This leaves a good and hardworking team stigmatized by a failure that was absolutely beyond their control.

The truth is that when there is a relevant change in the environment in the USA or in Western Europe, the projects are reassessed together with the plans and the budgets. In Latin America those big changes are very often hidden not to bother "the authority" with unexpected news and the project is continued as "as well as possible". On the other hand, "the authority", the foreign stakeholder of the project, pretends to ignore or is authentically unaware of the situation thus keeping original expectations intact.

Chile, one of the most stable countries in Latin America, enjoys a healthy business relationship with the USA. The Chilean stability allows them to transact with the USA in a consistent fashion.

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Unique Vs. Standard

The list of challenges we, Latin Americans, provided is very long, longer that the one Americans produced about doing projects with us. However it is easier for us to do business with them than it is for them to do business with us. So, why is our list of issues longer?

When someone in a highly standardized environment finds exceptions to the standards they count them as one standard that is not followed. For example: Informality, poor time Management, gender issues. Each count includes all instances in which the person found a standard deviation.

When people are not immersed in standard practices they describe an obstacle in terms of the particular instance. The example is produced and not the standard it fails to follow. This why our list is longer and more detailed. It does not refer to standard deviation but to the deviation of an individual's expectation. That individual's expectation varies from country to country making it challenging even for Latin American professionals to fulfill.

When we talk in Latin America we have to listen attentively to the way something is being said because the way of saying it may be new to us even though the concept expressed may be familiar. In the USA you have to pay more attention to the use of words. One word may have many meanings in the English language but only one meaning in the US. People there are trained to look for code words and once they hear them they tend to drift away from the message you are crafting based on their local decoding rules. They talk less and in a very standardized way compared to Latin Americans. Conversations are not an act of creation but an act of the most succinct communication possible.

When I talk or write I expect people to listen or read paying attention to my particular approach and focus. I expect them to be on the lookout for subtle references and for what remains unsaid. It is easier to achieve that with a Latin America audience which is more used to a lower degree of standardization.

Flexible Vs. Rigid

In a changing environment it is very common to find flexible people used to changing their strategy quickly. What works today may or may not work tomorrow because the environment may or may not be the same. On the other hand in markets where stability is less hard to find, people establish "best practices" and follow them.

The strategy people use in both ends of this spectrum makes sense. If it works it is done the same way, if not it is changed. The problem appears when someone from a stable environment expects to impose a rigid methodology in an unstable environment. It is not about the reception this methodology encounters or about good or bad will. Issues reveal themselves when change comes about and the plan needs to be adapted, the rigid methodology will not allow for it. There will be friction and then failure.

It is sometimes hard to explain the saying "*perfect is the enemy of good*" and that *good* is *good*. In Latin America this sort of resignation is a daily exercise. If it is done right or in excess will depend on the criteria of the people involved.

Good Judgment Vs. Rule

When the idea is to repeat things the way they were done before, what you need to know is how things were done before. What you learn becomes the rule. When people from the USA or Western Europe talk about communicating expectations often times they are passing on the rules. "Confronted with these situations, we expect from you these reactions".

Again, this all works in a stable environment. In Latin America the top value is to have sharp, seasoned, well developed decision making skills. It is not as important to follow the rules as it is to be able to diagnose a situation and decide, in situ, what to do.

Our creativity when making decisions may be disconcerting for someone alien to our environment. And that, the sense of confusion and puzzlement, is very dominant in multicultural projects. It is important to point out that the disconcerted project manager needs to make an effort to recover quickly and evaluate the outcome of this unexpected fact or move. What has just been described is uncomfortable but a daily occurrence in Latin America. Conversely this is not an acceptable work process, in general, for people from the USA and Western Europe.

Using our exhibit 1, the character may be puzzled to find someone not only in the same island but mocking him in the picture. He could celebrate the fact that he found someone else to keep him company and even plan and execute the return to land. Following the positive and open analysis even further, his new found companion has a very useful skill: a sense of humor.

Having said all this I'd prefer to have one person with good judgment over 5 rule followers on my team any day. When you are working in an environment where the rules change on you, people with seasoned decision making skills are the only pillars of your project while the plans a budgets are adjusted, if they ever get adjusted.

¿Is all this a risk for our project?

NO! Cultural differences are a **CERTAINTY** in international projects and, many times, in national projects as well. The risk is in the success or failure of our approach. Knowing there will be cultural differences that will have an impact on the project; we need to have a strategy to minimize that impact. Once we have a strategy to cope with cultural differences our risk analysis has to dwell on the appropriateness of our approach. The strategy or plan may be as simple as using people with previous experience or very complex including training and immersion programs. The important point is that it has to be in place because the obstacle will exist.

I do not adhere to approaching multicultural issues as risks because it leads to think it may or may not happen. In Latin America if you put something in the category of a risk it is very likely that you will never get to making a contingency plan for it because there are many other risks. The projects in our region seldom have the necessary resources to allow for an exhaustive risk analysis and the respective contingency plans. The moment cultural differences become a risk they fall to the bottom of a huge list of risks.

Proposed Solutions

What do we do with this long list of challenges? We approach them head on from the start! We should not wait for the foreigner to solve or mitigate the issues because very often they do not really realize what we are seeing. Actually, part of the "de facto" job description of the Latin American project manager that has to report to foreigners is to become an interface. The person form the USA or Western Europe gets through this project manager a version of the situation that is mellowed, simplified, translated at many more levels than the language.

Since the foreigner does not see the whole picture with all its colors it is impossible to appreciate what the project manager and the team in Latin America are doing for the project. We diminish the visibility of our skills and our work ourselves!

We need to open the game. If the team is international the cultural differences need to be dealt with at the beginning. In our professional practice we take 2 complementary approaches in international projects. On one hand, we work with the people and, on the other hand, with the communication.

Human Resources

The cultural aspect has to be on the table since the project's conception. Starting with the recruiting process, the cultural skills should be held at the same level of importance as the technical skills because they are as important to the success or the failure of the project. In fact, in many cases technical skills are easier to acquire that the capacity to deal with people we perceive as very different to ourselves.

Previous experience in international projects is desirable as long as you can prove the person was fit for the projects. It is very common to find foreign project managers with experience in Latin America that simply forced situations, imposed their style and had relative success at the expense of a very high price in local HR.

What should we look for in our team? Basically, people with **work and life experience in highly unstable environments with low levels of standardization**. People that are **flexible and eager to use their own judgment**. You may find these criteria hard to meet but they are not a challenge for HR experts, Psychologists, Educational Psychologists, etc. We should add: patience, tolerance, a sense of humor, curiosity and an attitude that favors personal and professional growth.

When evaluating your team's performance we have to be consistent with our selection criteria and not punish them for the same characteristics that lead us to choose them in the first place. What we look for when we select them is what we need to prize in the evaluations. Otherwise we will be sending a double message.

Team work is essential in multicultural projects. The cohesion in Latin American teams is due to personal affinity more that to professional skill set. This is why we need to foster the establishment of these personal relationships. Canned team development courses brought from somewhere else may not be the most adequate tools. We have all been through them and smiled to ourselves, if not in public, in private.

When it comes to motivation, we need to motivate with something that motivates. We need to take a little time to research the interests of our team. Harder than applying a canned motivator? Yes, but also much more successful. If the team has women you need to pay special attention. Often times what we, women, need is a little sensitivity to our multifaceted, multitasking life to yield 120% of ourselves. Telecommuting, flexible hours, etc. *** are big motivation boosters with mothers and, why not, fathers.

*** Note for the English version only: As Latin American PMs will know these flexible work settings are very seldom found in the region today.

Communication

When establishing the communication plan, again, we need to remember the communication will flow among people from different countries that expect to receive different types of communications and that regularly read and write in different languages. Any good plan takes into consideration the information to be transmitted and the receptors' communication styles. You also need to remember status issues and the management of power. One person more or less in a distribution list may be of no consequence or a terrible gaff depending on who the person is and where he or she is from. Experience with local communications is essential.

We suggest a new Outcome to the PMBOK© Communication Plan: **Process to deal with communication problems rooted in cultural differences**. This way when you encounter this problem you know what needs to be done. The best way is to invite a professional facilitator to untie the knot and clarify things before they add up to a problem.

Do not forget…

Time goes by when you are having fun. If we enjoy these challenges we can see them as opportunities for personal and professional growth. If we resort to our sense of humor, patience, tolerance and love for our work international projects become very satisfying experiences. In fact, many of the people that responded to our survey mentioned these personal skills as key tools in these projects.

Ask yourselves: **"Do I want to be right or do I want to be successful in this project?"** from the original phrase: "Do I want to be right or do I want to be happy?" (Mentruyt, 2002). What matters is to lead the project to success without hurting the people involved. That sometimes requires being flexible and giving.

Since I am *Porteña* (born in Buenos Aires city) I wanted to illustrate with a Tango but I failed at finding an adequate one. I will say it with Caribbean flavor: "Rise and enjoy because life is short./ Be happy at last because the rest doesn't matter." ("Ayer", lyrics and music by Juanito R. Márquez, popularized by Gloria Estefan in "Mi tierra"

1993). It goes on almost dedicated to us, project managers, alluding to lessons learnt: "Listen well with no fear what is taught/ by life gentlemen./ Don't look for another wound with the same mistake!/ Listen well!"****

If we can't resort to this type of sensation when an international project overwhelms us we should better devote ourselves to other types of projects with less cultural challenge.

**** Note for the English version only: The song loses dramatically its capacity to illustrate when translated. It will most likely not evoke in the English speaking reader what it brings to mind to the Latin American one. Not everything can be translated.

PMBOK© Mapping

So where to include all these suggestions in the context of the PMBOK©? Here are the suggestions we have worked with and have been most successful for us. Beside the suggestion we indicate if it is an Input (I), Tools and Techniques (T&T) or an Output (O).

HR Management
- 9.1 Organizational Planning
  - Project Interfaces (I)
  - Staffing Requirements (I)
  - Constraints (I)
  - Stakeholders Analysis (T & T)
  - Staffing Management Plan (O)
  - Supporting detail (O)
    - Organizational Impact
    - Training Needs
•9.2. Staff Acquisition
–Staffing Pool description (I)
–Recruitment Practices (I)
•9.3 Team Development
–Team Building Activities (T&T) (for multi-cultural teams)
–Reward and Recognition Systems (T&T)
–Training (T&T)
–Input to performance Appraisals (O)

Communications Management
- 10.1 Communications Planning
  - Communication Requirements, Constraints & Assumptions (I)
  - Stakeholder Analysis (T&T)
  - **New Suggested Output**: "How to deal with multi-culture derived communication issues", have a plan in place or a guideline on how to address these situations when they arise
- 10.3 Performance Reporting
  - Performance reviews (T&T)
- 10.4 Administrative Closure
  - Lessons Learned (O)

The next step

It is up to us, project managers in Latin America, to go forward with the idea that our skills have a value. **It is up to us** to know the power may be on the other side but we do have knowledge. Do we know it? Half way, we need to reinforce it. The world economy depresses us and puts us in a subordinate position to the international powers, but we have knowledge and skills.

Many people submitted their input generously and voluntarily going to the web site mentioned in exhibit 2. When collecting the information it became evident that we measure ourselves, reluctantly, with alien parameters that do not value our particular skills. When a project is delayed we see that, that the project is delayed, the same thing foreigners see. We forget that EVERYTHING changed except the project goal and that, in spite of that, the project was successful though x months late. Sometimes we do see it but we mention it informally and we do not have the methodology in place to measure our performance with our region's environment in mind.

We have special talents. As soon as we feel more comfortable with this idea, as soon as we believe it is true and not a justification for our bad habits we will be able to get out and sell it. We have skills that others do not have and that are useful in our region and in other emerging regions. We have to add our own success measures and use them when evaluating our projects.

> We are not a standard deviation. We have a different standard that has a value in most of the world. Let's lead the change to move from tolerance to PRODUCTIVITY revaluing our contribution.

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