

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT SUSTAINABILITY FAILURES

THE PROBLEM

There are myriad reasons for international development sustainability failures. One that needs more attention is the absence of cultural competence which often exists among project stakeholders. Intercultural skills are usually needed for project beneficiaries to successfully sustain project outcomes.

Intercultural differences occur in most human interaction processes in multicultural contexts. Decision making, performance management, project implementation, meeting participation and facilitation, managing conflict, training and learning, and effective leadership behaviors are among the many human interaction processes impacted by cultural differences within a multicultural group. When groups don't have the necessary intercultural skills to effectively work with other cultures within these human interactions, many organizational processes and systems are negatively impacted, including talent management and strategic planning,

Open and direct intercultural difference communication is rarely heard in the context of international development (or any other context for that matter). Like most people in every culture, development projects and the individuals involved generally tend more toward minimizing cultural differences rather than openly and proactively dealing with cultural differences in order to better achieve goals and establish relationships. This minimizing dynamic is strong in people with a high degree of unconscious bias. They "don't know that they don't know" about cultural differences because they don't believe there are significant cultural differences deeper than food, clothing, language and other elements of surface culture.

There are two dimensions to the cultural competence gap. First of all, often projects are not funded by or run by people who are interculturally skilled themselves. The second problem is that project participants are usually not (never?) provided intercultural skills training to complement the technical training in which they participate.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEFINED

The relevant aspect of intercultural competence germane to this discussion is intercultural interaction skills. My working definition of intercultural interaction skills consists of the following three primary abilities:

1. Can continually question cultural assumptions. One behavior of a person with this ability is to constantly hold an internal dialogue when working with different cultures – "I am going to hold my first project meeting with the project management team...what will this audience expect from my facilitation style that may be different from my own culture?" Continued practice of this skill begins the developmental process of reducing unconscious bias.

2. Can identify and explain cultural differences. One behavior that demonstrates this ability is to reserve judgment and de-personalize interactions by attributing behavior to cultural differences.

I once heard a culturally competent Westerner involved with a Technical Assistance project in Asia explain to another Western colleague, “I am having a struggle with my Asian manager in clarifying our roles and responsibilities within our relationship. Generally, he tends to put a high value on the hierarchical relationship in which he manages me top down, generally doesn’t allow me to initiate my own work, and monitors very closely. I understand his value orientation but I feel that we can better contribute to the project through a more egalitarian relationship in which he generally gives me more autonomy with initiating work, making decisions, and being accountable for the results. It’s going well though, because we continue to have discussions which are in part an open discussion of our cultural differences and ways we can reconcile them.” This Westerner demonstrates a high level of cultural difference consciousness – a great reduction in unconscious bias. Without the ability to consciously explain cultural differences, he probably would have been more likely to take it personally and judgmentally, as if he were interacting with someone from his own culture. Perhaps I would have heard him complain, “Aw man, my boss is a real micro manager and he just wants to hold onto his own power. He also seems quite arrogant to me.”

3. Can proactively and openly communicate about cultural differences and collaborate with counterparts to determine the nature of cultural adaptation needed to accomplish organizational goals and establish positive relationships. In the manager-employee relationship above, we can guess that with continued discussions about the cultural differences, they might come to a mutually respectful relationship that could better help project goals be accomplished.

The ability to consciously and authentically change cultural behavior which is counter to your cultural values in order to achieve goals and establish effective intercultural relationships is a core ability demonstrating intercultural competence.

Without this ability among project implementers and participants, the intended outcomes of projects are often not realized or sustained.

Changes in cultural behavior need to be reciprocal. Sometimes Western consultants need to adapt their behaviors in order to get things done with host country nationals and sometimes host country nationals need to adapt their behaviors toward Western value-driven behaviors. If all stakeholders are interculturally competent, the end result will often be something in between the two cultures. It becomes a very conscious process and multicultural counterparts can openly and proactively communicate with each other and collaborate to better determine the adaptation needed to accomplish project objectives.

HANDLING VALUES CLARIFICATION IN TRAINING PROGRAMS

Intercultural skills training help people address the following question:

What are the cultural values I believe in that may prevent me from accomplishing the behavior change required for me to contribute to achieving our work goals?

Training is obviously a large component of most international development projects. Training, combined with organizational improvements, results in the much wanted state of capacity building. Training can close individual and group performance gaps that are caused by a lack of adequate KSA; Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudinal orientations. Sufficient cognitive Knowledge + adequate awareness of Attitudinal orientations = Skill development.

The “A” part is where training participants increase their awareness of their attitudes toward their own and other cultures’ values. “What is your culture’s value on power? Is it generally hierarchical or egalitarian? What about typical attitudes toward change in your culture – risk tolerant or risk cautious? What about your team member from another culture? Does her culture value a more indirect or more direct approach to communication?”

Please forgive the generality of the equation above, but I think it helps to make the point that the “A” part is often overlooked. It is unfortunate because the constraint to new behaviors is often more in the gut (the “A” part) than in the head (the “K” part). One of the reasons for this neglect is that the “A” part involves a more complex training and learning process and a higher level of consciousness than the “K” part. The K part largely deals with content types like facts and procedures, while the A part is more concerned with concepts (like values), principles, and emotions.

CULTURAL VALUE DIFFERENCES AFFECTING DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Let's take a look below at three different sets of opposing cultural values and the tension between typical development project values and some of the cultures in which they are typically applied.

The first difference revolves around how a culture handles power in relationships. Participatory is a significant word in many development projects. Participatory behavior emerges from democratic and egalitarian values around power. However, most development projects occur in cultures which place a relatively higher value on hierarchical and status-based power relationships.

2. A second cultural value difference that needs to be resolved through intercultural training is independence vs. interdependence. Project implementers hailing from Western countries generally value a relatively independent approach to job ownership; work initiation, decision-making and results accountability. Most developing countries place a higher value on interdependence when it comes to job ownership. Ask people from the U.S., “Who owns your job” and 95% will respond, “I do.” Ask the same question to people who work in a relatively interdependent and hierarchical culture, and most will likely respond, “My boss does.”

When it comes to handling change - the crux of any project - most developing countries value a more cautious, or constrained approach to change. Western cultures typically value a more risk tolerant approach to change. This of course has a strong link with how a culture handles failure. The common risk tolerant culture phrase, "Failure is an opportunity for growth," generally does not compute in risk cautious cultures.

Note: Whether project implementers are Westerners, host country nationals, and/or other developing country nationals, the following dynamic usually applies: Projects themselves, which start with funders like the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and developed country aid agencies, generally designate beneficiary outcomes which reflect a higher degree of egalitarianism, greater independence, and risk tolerance than currently exist in the culture. This is not a problem at all in and of itself. These cultural differences are what they are, as we would say. The problem is that stakeholders from all sides generally don't experience a facilitated approach to reducing unconscious bias and development of intercultural interaction skills. Therefore, it is like trying to put square pegs into round holes. When intercultural skills are developed, there is a much greater chance that everyone involved will be able to translate the intended outcomes from one cultural context to another.

UNSUSTAINABILITY DUE TO LACK OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE – GAPS IN THE “A” of KSA

Item One: Even in one's own culture, Attitudinal orientation awareness needs to be addressed. When I worked as Director of Training for a large credit union in the U.S., we failed for a while when training loan officers to adapt their customer service behavior to achieve a new business strategy; moving from a sales culture to a consultative approach with members. One important change for loan officers was that they would be required to help members develop financial goals and plans. In order to do this, they needed to get into the member's personal and private financial history – “what's this bankruptcy on your credit report about?” Most Americans typically place a relatively high value on financial privacy. It is ironic, but some of our loan officers didn't make the transition because they weren't aware of this value as an obstacle to the new behavior. They learned the financial planning technique in their head. However, in their gut they were uncomfortable implementing it because of their high value on financial privacy. They were uncomfortable asking members to reveal their financial history. Once we brought it out into the open and involved them in a training process which identified new behaviors they could use to reconcile their own value difference with the values underlying the needed new behavior, we were much more successful.

Item Two: A Western consultant, Veronica, acted as a training expert in a South Asian country. One of her jobs was to do facilitation training for members of the education ministry around the country to increase their ability to facilitate participatory Community School Management Committee meetings. She had a great facilitation method that she designed to develop participatory facilitation of meetings and training programs. It was expressly designed for participants from hierarchical, indirect and risk-averse cultures to adapt their facilitation behavior to achieve the goals of more egalitarian and risk-tolerant driven behaviors – participatory behaviors. Her participants learned the stages, or the process steps of the method. One of the process steps was to conduct brainstorming as a technique for problem-solving and decision-making. In the method's process, a prescriptive answer by the facilitator at the end of the brainstorming was to be firmly avoided. However, since she didn't do a comprehensive Attitudinal orientation component as part of the Train-the-Facilitator program, it was very hard for the local facilitators, back in their home cultural environment, not to yield to giving the prescriptive solutions that their audience was expecting from them. After all, in their hierarchical cultural context, what else was the facilitator (the expert, and often senior person) there to do, if not to prescribe sage solutions? Had she done more work to develop the cultural competence of

the project participants, they would have been better equipped to move back into their core culture context and apply the method.

CHANGING CULTURAL BEHAVIOR vs. CHANGING THE CULTURE

During six years of working in developing countries, I have often heard the following phrase from Westerners and country nationals alike: "We are not trying to change the culture." I would agree with that phrase. However, what usually goes unrecognized is that development work in general is there to facilitate a change in cultural behavior.

The practice of intercultural interaction skills enables people to behave in a way that is in opposition to their core cultural values. The skill, and the heightened consciousness (reduction of unconscious bias) which accompanies it, transform a contradictory situation into a positive paradox that can be accepted. In fact, it is desirable. When people gain intercultural competence it provides them a new skill set, and for many, it's a rush! As one South Asian colleague (let's call him Manoj) with whom I worked wrote some months after I left his country, "I think back and admire things you have given us. Most importantly, staff are very independent and are comfortable in taking risks now a days." In the context of their particular jobs, they had developed an ability that previously they didn't even know existed to be developed! Most people in the world don't know that they don't know about intercultural competence. As one Ecuadorian participant eloquently put it to me after participating in an intercultural interaction skills learning and practice process, "I found out something about myself that I didn't even know it [sic] existed."

Now, this does not mean that Manoj goes back to his personal life and gets married without his parents' permission or that he independently makes other life decisions without consulting the senior people in his life. Now that he has developed intercultural skills he understands his own culture more deeply than before and he can consciously go back and forth between the cultures - like turning a switch.

ADAPTATION RECIPROCITY

A high level of group intercultural skill is evident when a norm of adaptation reciprocity exists. In the same way that Manoj developed his skills, I learned how to consciously adapt my typical American culture behavior to behaviors driven by hierarchical and interdependent cultural values. This happened in my roles both as a manager and as a subordinate. It involved many mistakes along the way. When this state of reciprocity is reached, you realize that it not so much about relatively vague "states of being" like open mindedness, cultural appreciation, or cultural sensitivity so that we don't offend. Of course, these three being states are necessary, but with intercultural skill, they become implicit. More explicit attention is paid to which cultural behaviors will best accomplish the group goals. It is more straightforward.

Until people can consciously and authentically adapt to another culture's behaviors, I don't believe they can truly appreciate another culture, beyond surface culture characteristics - like food and music. It is through adaptation actions that unconscious bias falls away, and appreciation is fostered. In my case, my default value on power relationships is strongly egalitarian. Once I began to consciously adapt to the more hierarchical behaviors I lost my prior

negative perceptions of them. For example, I could better see and feel how the role of the manager as a mentor in hierarchical cultures is connected to a close relationship between manager and subordinate.

BRINGING PROJECT OUTCOMES BACK HOME

One challenge for host nationals involved with international development projects is to develop a level of intercultural competence which enables them to effectively interact with foreign nationals involved in the project. Hopefully, international consultants are doing the same. Without intercultural competence, an even bigger challenge for local project participants can be going back to their home environment and applying their new learning and skills within their home country cultural context. This is the point at which sustainability becomes a problem. Remember the earlier example of Veronica's train-the-participatory facilitator effort.

So, my perspective is that intercultural interaction skills are needed to increase the likelihood of international development sustainability. But then that brings up the question of who is qualified to conduct intercultural training. In today's world there is a wide range of effectiveness among individuals and organizations providing services and products.

A problem is that many organizations, individuals and groups who need and want to develop intercultural competence don't have a deep enough understanding to differentiate between these providers in terms of quality and results. A large part of my website is devoted to helping intercultural skills product and service consumers to understand this quality issue. The site also contains descriptions of training workshops we offer which close the quality gaps existing in many training efforts today.

Thanks for reading.

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