Image behaviour in international engineering projects

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There are many factors beyond the control of managers that could determine the success or failure of a project, especially an international development project. In the era of globalisation, the project manager of an international project needs to understand key concepts in cross-cultural management and project management. Research conducted on the differences between South African and Chinese project managers, particularly with regard to 'face' or 'image', casts some light on this challenge.

A combination of exploratory and comparative research, employing surveys, was used to explore the cultural differences between Chinese and South African engineering and construction project managers on 'face/image' behaviour and the effects of this behaviour on five project management activities: project communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, contract process and team-building. 'Face/image' is a critical cultural issue for achieving project success in the Chinese community, because it represents prestige, respect, dignity and social status. Although the questionnaire was based on Chinese culture, South African project managers were asked to participate in order to illustrate differences where applicable.

Culture is a critical factor in international project management

Different projects should be managed in different ways. For a project to succeed, the people involved "should not only learn and practice its tools and techniques, but also learn, internalise and practice its work-related values/beliefs". The project management environment for international development projects is much more complicated than the environment for domestic projects in industrialised countries, since international projects face uncertainties caused by host country conditions. Research on international construction in China determined that cultural differences are a critical factor that can actually affect the outcome of an international project. For an international project manager, understanding key concepts in cross-cultural management and project management is a basic requirement.

Academics state that it is an immense challenge to define 'culture'. From an observational point of view, the central elements of any culture can be classified into two groups:

- Observable elements that constitute 'surface culture', such as customs, dress, dining, technology, arts and behaviour
- Hidden elements, called 'deep culture', such as values, beliefs and systems of thinking

In an article in the *International Journal of Cross-cultural Management*, Ronald Fischer of the Victoria University and the Centre for Applied Cross Cultural Research in Wellington, New Zealand, points out that culture has two key characteristics. It is a collective phenomenon, and it is learned or transmitted genetically. According to him, "culture is passed on through socialisation processes within specific groups, which require communication of key symbols, ideas, knowledge and values between individuals and from one generation to the next".

Chinese culture

China has a history of 5 000 years with specific outstanding cultural characteristics. The following typical Chinese behaviour relating to 'face/image' that may impact on international project success was identified:

- Directly commenting on or reject-ing others' opinions will make them lose 'face/image'.
- Saving others' 'face/image' is critical to maintaining harmonious Guanxi (personal relationship).
- 'Face/image' is more important than profit in some cases.
- One should strive for one's own 'face/image' to be recognised and save others' 'face' at the same time.

Research

The research project, which compared Chinese and Western concepts of relationships in construction project management work, focused specifically on the extent to which Western project management ideas

have been supported by the Chinese culture. A total of 75 Chinese and 65 South African project managers were identified on the basis of their project management experience to participate in the survey. The research had the following objectives:

- Identify typical Chinese 'face/image' behaviour.
- Establish how Chinese 'face/image' behaviour affects engineering project management activities.
- Conduct comparative research on Chinese and South African project managers with regard to 'face/image' behaviour.
- Develop a systematic framework for the modelling, analysis and management of intercultural 'face/image' behaviour in international project management.

The results of the research identified significant differences between Chinese and South African project managers in their 'face/image' behaviour with respect to three project activities. However, during the project contract process and project team-building, there seemed to be no significant difference between their 'face/image' behaviour.

With regard to the effects of 'face/image' behaviour on project management activities at sub-behaviour level, it seems that during

project communication and conflict resolution, 'face/image' is important for Chinese and South African respondents. They do not like to lose 'face/image' in project communication and conflict resolution activities.

Commenting directly on or rejecting others' opinions to make them lose 'face/image' during the project contract process is another variable that should be noted. It was rated the lowest by both Chinese and South African respondents. Communicating directly with little concern for the 'face/image' of one's counterpart in the project contract process attracted remarkable consensus from both groups. However, commenting directly on or rejecting others' opinions to make them lose 'face/image' during project communication was rated highly by Chinese respondents, but very low by South African respondents. Chinese project managers have much greater consideration for the 'face/image' of others than South African

project managers during project communication. It seems that 'face/image' is not that important to South African project managers during project communication.

With regard to the effects of 'face/image' behaviour on project management activities, the mean of the score for 'face/image' behaviour of Chinese respondents was much higher than that of South African respondents. This can be interpreted as Chinese project managers regarding 'face/image' in the five identified project management activities as much more important than their South African counterparts. However, both groups believe that 'face/image' is not a critical factor in the project contract process.

Finally, the results of the research were used to determine whether there is any difference between the ways in which the two groups rate the effects of each behaviour on the five project activities. A significant level of 0.05 was selected (95% confidence that the difference is not due to chance). Generally, the finding was that there are significant differences between Chinese and South African project managers' 'face/image' behaviour with regard to project communication, project negotiation and project conflict resolution. These differences could have a negative impact on project management activities, and could thus lead to problems. Chinese project managers consider the 'face/image' to represent prestige, respect, dignity and social status, while South African project managers do not seem to care about Chinese project managers' 'face/image' during project communication, negotiation and conflict resolution. Some difficulties may arise in the project management activities of international engineering

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→ *A conceptual model for managing cultural differences.*
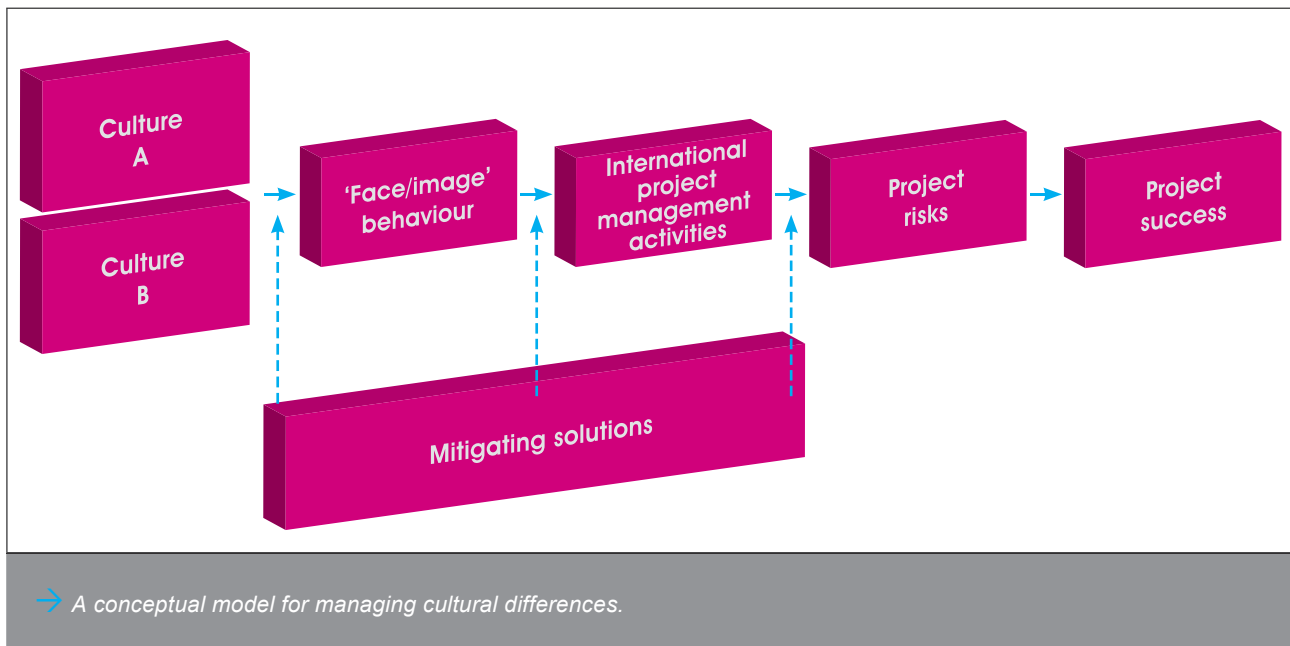
teams because of cultural differences. However, Chinese project managers seem to realise that South African project managers do not have the same concept of 'face/image'.

Conceptual model

A conceptual model was developed based on the results, which illustrates the relationships that are identified in the literature as the key relationships between 'face/image' behaviour in international project success. The model also shows the relationships between the components and the proposed solutions that can mitigate the negative effects of 'face/image' behaviour. This conceptual model gives a clear image of the path along which 'face/image' behaviour affects project success.

As there are significant differences between Chinese and South African project managers' 'face/image' behaviour regarding project communication, negotiation and conflict resolution, these activities may create potential risks, such as misunderstanding each other, unsatisfactory negotiation results and new conflicts during project conflict resolution. A recommendation was made that practical considerations should be based on the knowledge that project management is not universal, but culture-sensitive. ❸

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