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Do you really understand me? An analysis of cultural intelligence in global projects

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Abstract

Modern global leaders must be culturally intelligent to effectively operate in complex multicultural environments. While there is significant literature in place regarding cultural intelligence in global project management, there are several areas where our understanding remains limited. First, there is a lack of knowledge relating to the antecedents of cultural intelligence. Second, there is a lack of empirical studies capturing real-world data from industry relating to cultural intelligence in global projects. Third, it is unclear what correlation, if any, there is between leaders' characteristics and their level of cultural intelligence. To address these deficits, this study aims to identify the critical success factors (CSFs) for cultural intelligence in intercultural communication in the context of global projects and investigate the relationships between leader's characteristics and their level of cultural intelligence. Data were collected and analyzed from 85 project leaders currently working in a global multinational corporation (MNC) in Europe, Middle East, and Asia (EMEA). The findings confirm that emotional intelligence, personality, and openness to learning, communication and empathy are key to cultural intelligence in complex multicultural environments. The results advance our understanding of the antecedents to cultural intelligence and present actionable insights for companies.

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1. Introduction

Global projects are composed of people from varying cultures, each with different ways of thinking and working. While culturally diverse teams can provide significant benefits and competitive advantage to organizations they also present many challenges for leaders. Research suggests that leaders struggle to manage diversity which leads to miscommunication and weak relationships resulting in poor project performance [1].

Lückmann and Färber [2], assert that a third of global projects fail due to miscommunication resulting from a lack of cultural understanding and awareness. It seems that while leaders have historically relied on technical project management structures, insufficient attention has been paid to the management of different cultures in project teams. This deficit needs to be addressed. While much work has been conducted in recent years to advance our understanding of cultural intelligence there are several areas where understanding remains limited. First, there is a lack of knowledge about the antecedents to cultural intelligence in intercultural communication. In other words, we do not know which factors are important to enable effective cultural intelligence when communicating in a multicultural environment. Consequently, there is a lack of practical guidelines demonstrating how to effectively harness cultural differences in global projects [3]. Second, while scholars such as Cramton and Hinds [4] have called for further studies on cultural intelligence in intercultural communication, there is a lack of studies that analyze empirical data from industry in this domain. To date, prior work has mainly focused on analyzing data from students, however, there is a dearth of real-world practitioner-based data. Third, it is unclear what correlation, if any, exists between leaders' characteristics and their level of cultural intelligence.

To address these deficits this study seeks to advance our understanding of the factors that enable cultural intelligence in intercultural communication (ICC) in multicultural environments. Senior project leaders working in a large multinational organization (MNC) across the Europe Middle East and Asia (EMEA) region were targeted to gather valuable insights based on real-world industry data. To do this, a structured thematic literature review to analyze the extant literature in the domain was conducted. From this, a data collection instrument was designed and tested. Next, data were collected from 85 project leaders in 21 different countries in EMEA. The study's findings provide valuable insights concerning the extent to which critical success factors relating to cultural intelligence are perceived by leaders in a real-world project environment. The enquiry makes a valuable departure from previous research that is lab-based or based on student data. It bridges the gap between academia and practice, providing tangible and concise results to project leaders on how the critical success factors can enable cultural intelligence in global project teams.

2. Synthesis of the literature

An analysis of the extant literature reveals a comprehensive list of factors that need to be in place to enable effective cultural intelligence in intercultural communication. While it is apparent that many factors affect cultural intelligence in intercultural communication, four key constructs emerge as being particularly important, namely empathy, communication, personality, and openness to learning as well as emotional intelligence. While it is acknowledged that these categories are by no means exhaustive or indeed mutually exclusive, they are important to enable successful communication and deserve further scrutiny. The following section synthesizes the current literature and debate in the domain.

2.1 Empathy

Empathy refers to the ability to experience the feelings, perceptions, and thoughts of others. An empathetic leader identifies with the feelings related to the cultural norms, beliefs and behaviors that are associated with a specific culture. One of the primary responsibilities of a leader is to build and motivate the team to be successful. To achieve this the leader must understand how team members from diverse cultures are responding to activities within the project. Empathetic leaders develop an environment of trust within the project team. Effective cross-cultural management and leadership require the leader to possess empathy. Much research has suggested that gender influences the individual's capacity for empathy, with females considered to express more empathy than their male counterparts [5]. Spending time in different countries or cultures and engaging in the local culture allows leaders to better understand from the perspective of the 'other culture' as they have familiarity with it through personal experience [6]. Leadership and management styles need to change based on the culture they are working with. For management and leadership to be effective, an awareness that a different approach may be required based on the culture in question is key. Therefore, empathy is identified as a critical success factor of cultural intelligence in this study.

2.2 Communication

Globalization has led to increased dependency on effective collaboration and communication across multicultural teams. Miscommunication is one of the primary problems in intercultural communication and can be detrimental to project success. Effective communication helps establish trust across the team. When working across different cultures those social cues and behaviors do not exist to the same extent and can be misleading. Lack of appropriate language skills results in an inability to deliver the correct message. An effective communicator will ensure that the message intended was received sufficiently. Project leaders with strong communication skills can decode any cultural bias impacting those receiving or sending the message. Culturally intelligent leaders can identify individual behaviors versus universal behaviors to all humans [7]. The ability of the leader to effectively communicate is essential for understanding and respecting cultural differences. Research has also shown that females are more expressive and polite in their communication than males, with males being more assertive and direct [8]. Language is significant in intercultural communication [9]. The ability to connect with team members is vital from a leader's perspective. Often in organizations, there is a dependency on language intermediaries with English being the dominant language of the business [9]. Communication is key to effective intercultural communication (ICC), therefore, is identified as a critical success factor for cultural intelligence in this study.

2.3 Personality and openness to learn

Global projects and teams have led to an increasing need for leaders who can operate effectively across multiple cultures. Research has suggested that leaders' personality plays a significant role in determining their effectiveness working across cultures [10]. Project leaders who have predisposing characteristics such as extraversion, experiences in other countries and cultures are considered to be good candidates for global leadership roles. In addition, openness, drive and curiosity to learn about different cultures are key for developing cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence can be learned and developed over time. Therefore, project leaders working in global environments who are open to learning are more likely to develop their cultural intelligence. Research suggests that expatriates that are more culturally adjusted are open to the host country's norms and behaviors [11]. Research has also shown that openness is positively related to cultural intelligence and has been recognized as a key personality trait for cultural intelligence [12]. However, further research suggests that where agreeableness is low there is no longer a positive relationship between openness and cultural intelligence [13]. Prior studies have shown that females tend to score higher in extraversion, openness and agreeableness than males [14].

2.4 Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) enables an individual to appraise the emotions of another and react appropriately. However, EI does not assure that culturally specific emotions will be recognized. EI has been positively related to cultural intelligence [15, 16] and cultural intelligence extends EI [7]. Self-management and self-awareness are key elements of EI. Project leaders who possess high levels of EI will identify and acknowledge their deficiencies relating to cross-cultural awareness or knowledge. Without this self-awareness, it would be difficult for leaders to develop their cultural intelligence. EI is important in culturally diverse situations as certain social behaviors which are acceptable in some cultures are unacceptable in others. Leaders working across various cultures must possess the self-awareness to recognize their reactions to specific cues or behaviors and manage their actions to those cues. Females are considered to possess higher levels of emotional intelligence than males although emotional intelligence increases as the individual ages which can decrease the differences when comparing gender.

3. Research method

The first stage of this study involved a comprehensive analysis of current scholarship and debate concerning the antecedents to cultural intelligence. A structured approach was followed in this study. The search was limited to papers created between 2010 to 2020. A review of the abstracts and conclusions of these papers facilitated the initial summary of the papers, as well as high-level research gaps, key themes, and issues. A further analysis was

completed to synthesize the prior work in this space. Finally, a detailed analysis of the literature was completed, and the most relevant critical success factors were identified and classified. The second stage in the process involved the development of a structured survey instrument to collect data to capture the perceptions of respondents relative to the critical success factors identified in the extant literature. The approach taken to developing the instrument was based on the advice of DeVellis [17]. The questionnaire used in this study was divided into three sections. The first section focused on capturing critical information regarding the team leaders. The next sections focused on measuring the respondents' cultural intelligence. This section consists of 20 self-report statements based on the cultural intelligence scale [12] which is widely adopted in other studies. A 5-point Likert scale response system, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree was used to measure the extent to which respondents agreed with each item. The final section required respondents to rank the four success factors in order of importance. Before issuing the survey, pre-test meetings were conducted with team leaders and subject matter experts to assess the survey's content. These activities helped assess the content's validity and ensured adequate coverage. The instrument was also pilot tested with 5 representatives of the sample population. The survey questions were then amended based on feedback from these tests. Senior project leaders from multiple functions in a multinational organization working in EMEA were chosen to participate in this study due to their experience in managing and leading cross-cultural teams. Several actions were taken to mitigate non-response bias. A cover letter accompanied the email requesting participation in the study. Respondents were informed that the questionnaire would take less than 10 minutes to complete. The respondent's anonymity was guaranteed. Within the survey, questions were shortened and clarified where required. From a total of 158 distributed surveys, 85 responses were collected between April and May 2020.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Profile of respondents

The target population for this study comprised project leaders in a multinational organization operating in EMEA. The sampling frame consisted of project leaders who have significant experience leading multicultural teams. Systematic random sampling was chosen as the most appropriate sampling method. 158 questionnaires were issued, and 85 responses were received. Table 1 illustrates the profile of the respondents.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender			Highest education		
Male	58	68.24%	High school degree or equivalent	8	9.41%
Female	26	30.59%	Bachelor's degree	33	38.82%
Prefer not to say	1	1.18%	Diploma / Certificate	9	10.59%
Total	85	100%	Master's degree	35	41.18%
Working experience (years)			Function		
0-5	2	2.35%	Business Analysis	15	17.65%
6 to 10	12	14.12%	Architecture	3	3.53%
11 to 15	12	14.12%	Software Engineering	21	24.71%
>=16	59	69.41%	Production Support	21	24.71%
Number of Teams			Infrastructure	10	11.76%
1	46	56.1%	Risk and Security	3	3.53%
2-4	25	30.49%	Other	12	14.29%
>=5	11	13.41%	Number of Nationalities per team		
Born in country currently working in			1	12	14.63%
Yes	64	75.29%	2-4	44	53.66%
No	21	24.71%	>=5	26	31.71%

4.2 Reliability

The reliability of the questionnaire was checked before completing the data analysis. Internal reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha (see Table 2).

Table 2. Reliability

Construct	Item	# Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha	Inter-item correlation		
Emotional Intelligence	I am conscious of other people's values, beliefs and behaviors when interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds	N=4	4.35	0.87	$\alpha = 0.84$	0.714		
	I adjust my behavior when interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds.		4.16	0.857			$\alpha = 0.84$	0.673
	I am conscious of culture when I am interacting with people from different countries.		4.40	0.775			$\alpha = 0.84$	0.746
	I check the accuracy of my cultural knowledge as I interact with people from different cultures. For example, validating any assumptions.		3.78	0.956			$\alpha = 0.84$	0.584
Empathy	I am familiar with the legal systems of other cultures.	N=6	2.65	1.099	$\alpha = 0.74$	0.612		
	I can speak different languages.		2.95	1.542			$\alpha = 0.74$	0.326
	I am familiar with the value systems of other cultures.		3.64	0.898			$\alpha = 0.74$	0.683
	I am familiar with the economic systems of other cultures.		3.54	0.907			$\alpha = 0.74$	0.430
	I am familiar with the religious beliefs of other cultures.		3.79	0.832			$\alpha = 0.74$	0.444
	I am familiar with the rules for expressing non-verbal behaviors in other cultures.		3.22	0.993			$\alpha = 0.74$	0.589
Personality & Openness	I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.	N=5	4.66	0.568	$\alpha = 0.79$	0.572		
	I can socialize with locals in a culture that is unfamiliar to me.		4.27	0.836			$\alpha = 0.79$	0.570
	I can deal with the stresses of adjusting to a culture that is new to me.		4.24	0.797			$\alpha = 0.79$	0.574
	I enjoy living in cultures that are unfamiliar to me.		3.93	0.936			$\alpha = 0.79$	0.620
	I can get accustomed to the shopping conditions in a different culture.		4.12	0.851			$\alpha = 0.79$	0.531
Communication	I change my verbal behavior (e.g. accent, tone) when a cross-cultural interaction requires it.	N=5	4.05	0.987	$\alpha = 0.88$	0.570		
	I use pause and silence differently to suit different cross-cultural situations.		3.76	0.959			$\alpha = 0.88$	0.811
	I vary the rate of my speaking when a cross-cultural situation requires it.		4.14	0.928			$\alpha = 0.88$	0.724
	I change my non-verbal behavior when a cross-cultural situation requires it.		3.73	0.931			$\alpha = 0.88$	0.773
	I alter my facial expression when a cross-cultural interaction requires it.		3.38	1.012			$\alpha = 0.88$	0.714

4.3 Validity and Normality

Validity was checked before completing the data analysis to assess the extent to which each concept is accurately measured in the study. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was employed to confirm the validity of the questionnaire used in the study. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy is 0.810, which exceeds the threshold of 0.7, which indicates sufficient items for each factor. Bartlett's test is significant with p -value < 0.05 . This study employed Shapiro-Wilk, Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Lilliefors tests to determine whether the significance levels of our data collected fitted a normal distribution. Test results show that the values of skewness

and kurtosis of all the questions are not close to zero and the p-values are all less than 0.01, which means that the data does not fit the normal distribution. Consequently, non-parametric tests were used to analyze data in this study.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Mann Whitney U

A Mann Whitney U test is used to investigate differences between comparable groups using non-parametric methods for two groups on one set of data. Where Asymp Sig. (2-tailed) value is less than 0.05 there is evidence to suggest a significant statistical difference.

5.1.1 Gender (Male and Female)

A Mann Whitney U test was conducted to ascertain whether males and females responded differently concerning the four critical success factors. The results showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups at a significance level of 0.05. e.g., emotional intelligence (U = 743, p = .690), empathy (U = 761, p = .830), personality and openness (U = 769, p = .884) communication (U = 639, p = .142). Based on these results, it can be concluded that there is no difference between the responses of males and female project managers in this study. This is unexpected as research has shown that there is a difference in emotional intelligence [18] and empathy [19] when considering gender. No significant difference was identified with personality and openness or communication. As with EI and empathy, this was unexpected as the literature suggests that women are generally more expressive than men [8] showing more extraversion and agreeableness [13,14]. Those who are more agreeable tend to have higher cultural intelligence. Women represented 30% of the responses, 26 from a total of 85.

5.2 Born in country currently working in

A Mann Whitney U test was conducted to ascertain whether there was a difference between respondents who were born in a different country than where they currently work and their behavior concerning the critical success factors for cultural intelligence. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups at a significance level of 0.05 for three of the four constructs. e.g., emotional intelligence (U = 405, p = .004), empathy (U = 441, p = .015), personality and openness (U = 474, p = .026) communication (U = 578, p = .299). A significant statistical difference is reported concerning whether the leader currently lives in their native country and emotional intelligence, empathy and personality and openness. Emotional intelligence enables an individual to appraise the emotions of another and react appropriately. Self-awareness and self-management are key to emotional intelligence. Experience of living and working in a culture which you are not native to will increase the likelihood of that individual having more emotional intelligence as they need to adjust to settle into the local culture. A significant statistical difference was reported regarding empathy. Empathy is the ability to identify and experience the feelings related to the cultural norms, beliefs and behaviors that are associated with a specific culture. Therefore, living in another country / culture is likely to increase the empathy of that leader. This aligns with the previous literature analyzed. No significant statistical difference is reported regarding communication and whether the leader currently lives in their native country. This is the only construct that did not present any significant differences.

5.3 Kruskal-Wallis

A Kruskal-Wallis test is used to investigate differences between comparable groups using non-parametric methods for three or more samples. Where Asymp Sig. (2-tailed) value is less than 0.05 there is evidence to suggest a significant statistical difference. As the Kruskal-Wallis test cannot specify where the significant differences lie, a post-hoc Mann Whitney U test was carried out where a significant statistical difference was found.

5.3.1 Number of nationalities represented on teams

Results of a Kruskal-Wallis test indicates there is a statistically significant difference with regard to empathy ($p=0.029$) within these groups. Results of the post-hoc Mann Whitney U test indicated there were significant statistical differences between leaders who had 2-4 nationalities in their teams and those who had 5 or more nationalities in their teams ($p=0.006$). Those who had only one nationality on their team did not present any statistical difference. Further analysis is required to better understand this. Interviews and observational studies are recommended to gain further insights into this area. There was no statistically significant difference with regard to emotional intelligence, communication or personality and openness within these groups.

5.3.2 Years experience of the leader

Results of a Kruskal-Wallis test indicate no statistically significant difference with regard to any of the four constructs: emotional intelligence ($p=0.681$), empathy ($p=0.382$), communication ($p=0.865$), personality and openness ($p=0.455$).

5.4 Critical Success Factors Ranking

Personality and an openness to learning were identified by respondents as the most important CSF of those provided with communication ranking second. Emotional intelligence was third and empathy ranked as the least important to the respondents. Interestingly, this aligns with the findings in the literature whereby openness, drive and curiosity to learn about different cultures are identified as key for developing cultural intelligence.

6. Contributions and limitations

6.1 Contributions

This study comprises a unique academic inquiry into the antecedents for cultural intelligence. The study answers calls from scholars to examine an important but neglected area in the project management discourse. The findings make an important contribution to the current discussion and debate and provide empirical evidence based on real-world data. The findings confirm that emotional intelligence, personality, and openness to learning, communication and empathy are key to cultural intelligence in complex multicultural environments. This study has some managerial implications that should also be emphasized. This study has highlighted the importance of cultural intelligence in ICC in global project management. The results of this study can also help project leaders to focus on those specific factors that enable cultural intelligence. More specifically, the four constructs for analyzing cultural intelligence in ICC may offer a practical framework for practitioners. The early identification of how these constructs manifest in practice allows for proactive and theoretically grounded managerial behaviors and actions. The method employed in the survey can be used to create cultural intelligence profiles for project managers and leaders to help with this. Project leaders could consider this as a useful mechanism to enable them to recruit for specific projects in a multicultural environment. The findings can also help to customize training and improvement activities in an established setting as they can enable managers to re-allocate their resources to sustain resource efficiency.

6.2 Limitations

Despite every effort to ensure scientific rigor this study has some limitations that should be noted. First and foremost, as this is a self-report study, respondents may respond more favorably and so the results may not be an accurate reflection of reality. In addition, while the 20 questions examining the CSFs were deemed to be valid and reliable a more extensive study using additional methods is recommended. For example, supplementary qualitative interviews may provide a more nuanced understanding of the issues and challenges in specific contexts. The survey did not capture the location of the respondents. The omission of this information was deliberate to respect the anonymity of the respondent. The rationale was where the personally identifiable data was obfuscated then the more truthful and open the respondent would be. This would allow for a more thorough analysis to be completed

by identifying any patterns which may be present in the data based on specific locations. Within this survey, there may have been some cultural nuances that were disregarded by sending out a standard, English self-report. The questionnaire was executed only once. Ideally, a longitudinal approach should be adopted, and the questionnaire should be re-run to gather more robust results. A larger sample size is also recommended with an even split across males and females to improve the robustness of results.

7. Conclusions

A pivot towards managing ‘softer skills’ such as empathy, emotional and cultural intelligence in conjunction with globalization, has required a change in the approach to project management. The ability of the project leader to connect with the team significantly enhances their ability to influence and motivate which in turn has a positive effect on performance. However, building high performing teams is a challenge for leaders. Global project teams introduce further dynamics as the leader-team relationship is to be cultivated by leaders across cultural borders. Cultural intelligence is one of many contributors to intercultural communication. Understanding the antecedents to cultural intelligence will provide valuable insights into leaders’ success or lack thereof. This study focused on the dynamics of cultural intelligence in intercultural communication in global project teams. This research confirms the importance of cultural intelligence in managing and leading global projects. These research findings advance the understanding of cultural intelligence in project leadership and provide valuable insights into several influential factors for the successful delivery of global projects.

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