



Conflict-resolving behaviour of project managers in international projects: A culture-based comparative study



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ABSTRACT

The cultural issue is obtaining more and more consideration in international project management and the risky nature of international projects reinforces this consideration. Conflict-resolving behaviour is one of the cultural behaviours that can affect project success. This paper addresses comparative research between Chinese and South African project managers in their conflict-resolving behaviour, as regards certain project activities relating to international projects. The results show that the differences between the conflict-resolving behaviours of the two groups are significant, in terms of project communication, negotiation and conflict-resolution activities. This research will fill a gap in the cross-cultural conflict resolving behaviour comparison study of the international project management arena. The results and suggestions should assist practitioners and researchers involved in international R&D and technologic project management to improve their skills in communication, collaboration and staff training.

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1. Introduction

With the advent of globalisation, project management is no longer a local issue but an international one, which by its nature, involves risks. 'Project management is now well-developed and well-accepted as a domain for professional expertise and as an area for academic research and discourse. However project management remains a highly problematical endeavour' [1]. Changes in the global environment present organisations with both opportunities and challenges [2]. International contractors continue to attempt to function effectively in the international construction industry. These international contractors should determine to meet international project management standards and therefore, improve their competitiveness [3]. The products of the construction industry have long-term impacts on social, economic and environmental sustainability and thus, the project management of construction projects plays an important role in sustainable development [4].

There are many factors such as social, economic, political, cultural, communication and legal factors, which are beyond the control of management, yet could determine the success or failure

of a project, especially when managing international development projects [5,6]. Different projects require different ways of management [7]. Wang and Liu (2007) also argue that, for a project to succeed, the people involved, 'should not only learn its tools and techniques, but also learn, internalise and practise its work-related values/beliefs' [8]. The project management (PM) environment for international development projects is also much more complex than as are domestic projects, in industrialised countries [9].

The knowledge and expertise required for domestic construction projects are not necessarily adequate for developing a strategy for international construction projects. Project managers should understand the social, economic, political and cultural factors that affect the project management environment [10]. International project managers, therefore, also encounter unique situations, over and above the challenges faced by domestic project managers [11].

Many researchers and practitioners [10] are aware of the challenge of managing international projects, since such projects present uncertainties caused by the host country conditions [13]. Researchers have previously identified some key factors that may constrain the success of international projects, among which cultural difference is an important aspect. Pheng and Leong (2000) [14], for example, conducted research on international construction projects in China and determined that cultural differences are a critical factor that could affect the outcome of an international project. For an international project manager, understanding key

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concepts in cross-cultural management and project management, is a basic requirement in the era of globalisation. Chen and Partington (2004), conducted a study comparing Chinese and Western concepts of relationships in construction project management [15]. They examined the extent to which Western project management ideas might have been supported by Chinese culture and recommend that practical considerations in specific situations should be based on the knowledge that project management is not universal but culture-sensitive. Muriithi and Crawford (2003), also argued that Western project management concepts might not be applicable in cultures that are not so deeply rooted in Western philosophy [16]. They suggested that appropriate modifications could be made to current management theories, by studying cultural differences. Bertholo (2013), discussed the irrefutable aspect of culture in project management, in order to understand how the impact might be better controlled and the project better guided to success [17]. Large-scale international projects are typically of a cross-cultural nature, therefore, a high degree of coordination and communication is essential for conflict resolution. Communication in the international environment is complicated by, different languages, cultures and etiquette [10]. There is a need to understand the impact of culture differences in conflict-solving behaviour, in managing international projects.

In recent years, there have been an increasing number of projects in South Africa involving Chinese investors and contractors. Conflict resolving has become an extremely challenging task in international projects, where the stakeholders come from different cultural backgrounds. It is important to understand the differences in conflict resolving behaviours between the Chinese and South African project managers, in these international projects. This paper aims to develop a systematic framework for the modelling, analysis and management of constraining factors in international projects, in order to establish a linkage between cultural differences and project management activities and to control, as well as mitigate, the negative effects of cultural differences. This study takes Chinese cultural behaviours as the basis and compares the behaviours of South African and Chinese project managers. The results will fill a gap in the above mentioned perspective and benefit project managers for such as technology development projects and R&D projects. The scope of the research addressed in this paper is international projects in general but focuses more on the construction projects. Consequently, the research topic presented in this paper will match this tendency and focus on enriching PM theories.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Cultural behaviour in project management

It is evident in the high-level discussions indicate that managing international projects is a significant challenge for project managers. A number of unique constraining factors that arise from foreign business environments, have a negative impact on international projects, specifically on the construction projects. The management of these constraining factors is a critical issue for an international project to be succeed.

Social, economic, political, cultural, communication and legal factors, are some of the constraining factors regarding the success of an international project [18,19,41]. The above mentioned authors agree that the main issues arise, when managing international projects is no longer related to controlling and scheduling. Further researches, providing more insight into the culture influence, were conducted on the basis of comparison study method. Rees-Caldwell and Pinnington (2013), conducted a survey on the impact of national culture on project management between Arab and British

groups and found significant differences in time planning, innovation, integration and communication variables [20]. They concluded that national culture influenced the way in which a project manager understood project planning. In another comparative study between Asia and Western countries, Power et al. (2010), highlighted the importance of national culture and suggested the significance of the cultural characteristic of individualism, in determining plant level investment outcomes in Asian economies [21]. Mueller (2014), investigated the cultural antecedents of knowledge-sharing between different projects teams and found positive effects of time, structure, output orientation and openness concerning the knowledge process [11].

Previous research mostly stressed on more abstract aspects such as belief and value systems [22]. Few academics and practitioners have, however, done further research linking these constraining factors to project management practices. Some previous researchers restricted themselves to identifying the problems caused by the above mentioned factors but did not design systematic methods to overcome this barrier [9,23]. Wang and Liu (2007) conducted a study on how to overcome the cultural barriers of Western project management in the Chinese firms [8]. The authors stated that the literature review did not reveal an appropriate empirical study in which focused on how to modify project management practices in order to fit the Chinese culture or how to modify the Chinese approaches. It is, therefore, essential to understand the meaning of the term, 'culture', before discussing cultural differences in international project management. Amster and Bohm researched on the cultural behavioural differences in IT projects and identified 127 behaviors affecting project success and cross-cultural cooperation between Indian and foreign project managers [22]. Through a case study, Al-Arjani discussed the cultural issue on the scheduling of Saudi Arabian urban project, and expected to benefit practitioners to understand the scheduling difficulties [24].

Conflict-resolving behaviour is one of the more important cultural issues that are critical to a project manager involved in the international environment. When discussing culture, conflict-resolution needs to be considered.

2.2. Conflict-resolving behaviours

Conflict has been viewed as being dysfunctional and time consuming [25]. Conflict management, with the effective recognition and use of high-context skills (high-context culture, such as in China), is a basic requirement for success. The manner of managing conflict varies in different cultures [25], which is confirmed by Tsai and Chi (2009) [26]. In their study regarding the Taiwanese construction industry, stated that conflict-resolution behaviour is influenced by people's cultural orientations. From historical research, some have suggested various techniques to overcome and avoid conflict situations. Avoidance, accommodation, compromise, competition and collaboration, are such behaviour-related strategies, which are widely recognised and used in a conflict environment [25]. Su et al. (2013) examined conflict-resolution behaviour in projects and claimed their method outperformed the findings of previous research [27].

Black and Mouton (cited in Borisoff and Victor 1989), identified five conflict management approaches, namely problem-solving, smoothing, forcing, withdrawal and sharing, which are still widely used by researchers as effective ways to solve conflicts. Conflicts have an influential effect on the outcomes [28] and they must be suitably resolved, in order to obtain the desired results [29].

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