



29th World Congress International Project Management Association (IPMA) 2015, IPMA WC 2015, 28-30 September – 1 October 2015, Westin Playa Bonita, Panama

Exploring cultural dimensions of Mexican project managers

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Abstract

Research on multicultural management is extended. Much of the work is based on Hofstede's studies which address four cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1983). However, not much has been done focusing on project management and even less about the cultural dimensions of Mexican project managers. Octavio Paz in his prized novel *Labyrinth of the Solitude* (1976) and Samuel Ramos in his classic *The Profile of Man and Mexican Culture* (1951) have pointed out common traits associated to Mexicans like solitude, improvisation, and low self-esteem as. These do not happen to be the best qualities for project managers; therefore, the main purpose of this research is to explore and understand Mexican's project managers behavior under three specific cultural dimensions (Kets de Vries, 2001): private-public space orientation, competitive-collaborative relations, and monochronic-polychronic time orientation. A survey was applied to more than a hundred project managers. Results show that they are oriented towards public space and a collaborative relation rather than a competitive one. Although available literature on the subject refers that Mexicans have a polychronic time orientation (Moran, Harris & Moran, 2007), this belief was not supported by the data. The resulting orientations are discussed and compared with some project management competences described in the IPMA-ICB v3 Standard, trying to unveil an indication of Mexican project managers' performance. The results shed light on Mexican and perhaps also Latin American project managers' performance when working in multicultural teams.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of IPMA WC 2015.

Keywords: multicultural project management; Mexican culture at work; culture comparative studies; project management competences.

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1. Introduction

The amount of projects in a global environment is growing every day, and their successful implementation requires of individuals with a mixture of cultural and functional skills working into an organizational unity called “project team” (Ranf, 2010). For this cell to be effective, it is necessary to be aware of the challenges arising due to cultural differences.

In the last 30 years, much has been written about cultural differences among professionals from different cultures and their corresponding effects in productivity. The seminal work of Hofstede (1983a) identifying and describing four cultural dimensions was a milestone. Since then, many studies have explored, tested, and applied his model in different areas and countries. However, only a few studies have led to explore new cultural considerations focused on project management (PM) (Burchel & Gilden, 2008) and much less on the culture of Mexican project managers.

To Mexicans in general time happens to be a loose concept and work is less important than family or friends’ relationship (Moran, Harris & Moran, 2007). PM success however is strongly related to time and work to be done, what can then be expected from Mexican project managers competing in global scenarios?

This paper describes a research done in Mexico aimed at exploring Mexican project managers’ behaviors under three specific cultural dimensions proposed by Kets de Vries (2001): *public space orientation*, *cooperative relationship*, and *polychronic time*. A brief review of the literature is developed first where the culture and behavior of Mexicans are explored. Then the research design and results are proposed; they are based on three hypotheses and a quantitative analysis of more than one hundred answered questionnaires. Lastly, the analysis and implications for Mexican and Latin American project managers in general are presented.

2. Literature review

The concept of *culture* used throughout this investigation refers mainly to the values, beliefs, and principles that characterize a group of individuals rooted on their ethnic background (Moran, Harris & Moran, 2007).

Regarding studies about the Mexican culture, two essays published in the last century represent the most complete picture of typical Mexicans living in Mexico and the USA. *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, written by Samuel Ramos in 1934, and *The Labyrinth of the Solitude* by Octavio Paz in 1950 an oeuvre that won a novel prize.

“The Mexican undervalues himself, not so much because he is inferior, but because he believes it,” wrote Ramos (1951). “Within an extensive group of individuals with members in all of the social classes, one observes character traits like distrust, aggressiveness, and hypersensitivity to insult,” observed the author in referring to his contemporary Mexican “paisanos” in the 40s and 50s. The origin of this inferiority feeling might be rooted on the Spanish conquest and the Colony period, when the vast majority of the population, composed by Indians and Mestizos, was discriminated first by the minority of Spanish conquerors and later by the Creole social class.

Concerning team work and planning skills, Mexicans do not seem to be particularly competent. Ramos, wrote “The most striking aspect of Mexican character, at first sight, is distrust (...) does not distrust any man or woman, in particular; he distrusts all men and all women” and “In México each man concerns himself only with immediate issues. He works for today and tomorrow, never for later (...) He has therefore suppressed from his life one of its most important dimensions –the future.” A bit of ingeniousness is a particularity of Mexicans, concedes Ramos “He is ingenious in detracting to others at the point of annihilating them.”

The essayist and poet Octavio Paz (1976) agreed with Samuel Ramos referring to Mexicans “an inferiority complex influenced our preference for analysis and that the meagerness of our creative output was due not so much to the growth of our critical faculties at the expense of our creativity as it was to our instinctive doubts of our abilities.” He describes directly and not less crudely a particular trait of Mexicans that rises strong doubts around Mexicans’ capacity to openly and sincerely work in teams in the way we read in PM treatments and standards: “The Mexican (...) seems to me to be a person who shuts himself away to protect himself: his face is a mask and so is his smile. In his harsh solitude, which is both barbed and courteous, everything serves him as a defense: silence and words, politeness and disdain, irony and resignation.” On the other hand, the acute writer unveils a more attractive and collective attitude when it is about partying, “The solitary Mexican loves fiestas and public gatherings. Any occasion for getting together will serve, any pretext to stop the flow of time and commemorate men and events with

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