

News-Service Project Management

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Six tips to pack in your travel bag as an international project manager

Networking Opens Doors to Project Managers in Asia

Summary: International project work has developed into a mega trend – more and more project managers are sent abroad. Once they arrive in their host country difficulties tend to pile up. It is not that they misstep because of cultural differences, the problems often come up in other unexpected areas. Here are six helpful tips for project managers abroad.

For three days the project manager trained how to do business in China. In his training room he learned how to greet a Chinese client, how to give feedback to Chinese staff – and how to say No during negotiations without saying No – so that his Chinese counterpart will not lose face. However, this intercultural training proved to be of little use in China. The problems the project manager faced with his Chinese-German business venture were of a different nature entirely. “The training was excellent, but did little to prepare me for the real challenges ahead,” the project manager reported from his mission abroad.

For a long time intercultural trainings were seen as key in setting up project managers for project work abroad. This has changed. “These trainings are losing their value and relevance”, says Wolfgang Rabl, managing director at next level consulting. Because our world has shrunk into the global village long ago. Many managers in Asia studied in the States or in Europe and Western managers have gained experience of Asia. Social media also aid in knowing and understanding other cultures.

Nowadays international projects are about much more than avoiding cultural missteps. The challenges have shifted – and they have grown, observes Wolfgang Rabl. It is mostly the unexpected problems that are impeding project work: Non-transparent decision making processes on the side of the client for example or problems with conference calls or a lack of personal networks in the host country. Wolfgang Rabl offers six tips that all international project managers should pack when venturing out on their mission:

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Tip One: Creating a Shared Approach to the Work

Many project managers assume that projects are handled in the same way all over the world. This is a mistake! The approach, processes, tools and software used differ immensely from country to country. “Project managers should stay flexible in their approach, think in terms of possibilities and keep their options open”, says Wolfgang Rabl. For example if staff delivers reliable results on the basis of a simple spreadsheet, there is no point in forcing complex calculation models on them simply because that is what the project manager is used to. Professional project managers just accept what works in the host country even if they would judge some approaches expensive or time wasting. They know that this kind of concession motivates the team, supports good work and binds important partners more firmly to the project.

Tip Two: Communication

Digital communication in project management works just fine – as long as there is a reliable internet connection. Project managers cannot assume communication to just work. And: In international teams not all colleagues are equally adept in working with tools like video conferencing, document sharing or online presentations. The mastery of such communication media often requires some training and time. A project manager should keep that in mind. In addition a project manager should plan in detail how his team should prepare online-meetings, how to write minutes or how to respond to a malfunction or slip-ups. “Don’t assume that online communication will work as smoothly as usual”, recommends Wolfgang Rabl, “Have a plan B ready that you can fall back on in case of difficulties.”

Tip Three: Meeting in Person

Seemingly international team members grow close through video conferencing and other online-communication tools. Even if information flows, real relationships are not built that way. “That is why all involved should get together in person at regular intervals – even if travel costs time and money”, explains Wolfgang Rabl, “This is the only way to establish trust between people.” International project professionals aim to enable personal relationships between their team members. And they

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make use of personal meetings not only to talk business but also to get to know each other, to share small talk and some fun experiences.

Tip Four: Your Personal Network

This sounds surprising: But with Asian business teams the highest ranking person is recognised by the fact that he speaks little. “Especially in Asia corporate culture is shaped by hierarchy,” explains Wolfgang Rabl, “For many Europeans this maze of hierarchy-based rules and peculiarities is difficult to penetrate.” Professional project managers rely on personal networks to take a look behind “the scenes” at their clients’, suppliers’ and other project stakeholders’ work places. Unofficial tips and pointers often reach them through such networks; and new important doors are opened. It is highly recommended to make the effort of building such a personal network in the host country – a task that should rank highly on the project manager’s personal agenda.

Tip Five: The Decision Making Structure

Regardless if this is about changing plans or additional tasks – every project needs fast decisions from its sponsors. This is why professional project managers investigate the decision-making structures of their venture. How many parties are involved? What is their agenda? How can communication between the parties be fast-tracked? „In international projects such structures are often especially complex and difficult to grasp”, explains Wolfgang Rabl, “this can be the case because there is a high number of international players involved or because of a strongly entrenched hierarchical set-up in the local organisation.” Experienced project managers try to simplify such structures. For example they form a Round Table with all parties involved as a decision making body. This Round Table then meets regularly to steer the course of the project.

Tip Six: Conflict Resolution

At the latest when friction and conflict surface between international project stakeholders the project manager will know how well he has laid his groundwork. Conflict is resolved differently for different cultures – herein lies the true problem. For example the subtle signals heralding

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conflict in Asia often escape a Western project manager. Once the conflict becomes palpable, it already has a long history; it becomes tough to resolve. Well-versed international project managers constantly scan their stakeholders for a brewing conflict and follow their gut feeling on this. To resolve conflict project managers should consciously look for constructive solutions; for example German managers often get stuck in looking for a culprit and cut off their escape route towards a resolution. And: Many conflicts abroad take patience and resilience. “It is important not to wait too long for another party to take initiative”, explains Wolfgang Rabl. He knows of a lot of professionals who take the bull by its horns, pack their suitcases and start a conversation with the parties involved on-site. “Sometimes the project manager needs to cede ground, even if he feels in the right”, says Wolfgang Rabl. In many countries doors will open unexpectedly when we move towards the other, show appreciation and personally signal our willingness to find a solution.

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