

Book review

Culture and Project Management – Managing Diversity in Multicultural Projects

Omar Zein. Gower, Farnham, UK, 2015, ISBN: 978-1-4724-1382-6, £70.00, 282 pp.

'Globalisation', writes the author in his introduction, 'is a reality for most developed nations today'. This reality is that in the space of two or three generations, projects are not undertaken by single, local, nations but by multinational ventures that involve organisations from different countries and continents. The outcome of a lack of awareness of the differences between these countries is often seen and manifested as conflict and ill-feeling among project partners. Indirectly and less obvious is a reduction in project effectiveness as the synergies and opportunities that the different partners bring are not harnessed.

So project managers have for many years now known that they need to develop their approaches. As Zein says in his introduction, there is an acknowledgement among managers that 'the practices of the "other" cultures ... can often be more efficient and effective than their own'. So sets the scene for the book, with the fundamental premise that there is a cost to ignoring or avoiding culture. The audience for the book is practicing managers, and while it is also accessible to academics, the author has pitched his book carefully to tweak at the motivations of practicing project managers. He knows that they will respond to a thesis that essentially says there is a cost involved and here is how to avoid it. The book is not a scholarly consideration of the development of culture theories – this is an area very heavily researched by scholars and academics internationally; instead, Zein uses established findings on culture and management and adapts these to the specific needs of project management.

The structure is useful and accessible. He splits his work into four parts. Part I allows an understanding of culture, its definition, its artefacts and beliefs with many examples particularly through the eyes of an (presumably fictional) international manager, Rabia Khan. In Part II, Zein considers the theoretical considerations and reviews the key studies in culture and

management. While he starts with the obvious and oft cited work of Hofstede and his cultural dimensions, other studies are presented – Bond, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner for instance. Part II continues with deeper considerations of the key concepts of culture such as power-distance, individualism against collectivism, masculinity against femininity, uncertainty avoidance and so on, all through the eyes of another fictional manager, Allen Young. This approach is extremely readable and enjoyable, and certainly, for the newcomer to culture understanding, it allows a very quick grasp of the impact of culture on project situations.

Part III is a more pragmatic consideration of how culture impacts on key project management issues – planning, monitoring, risk, leadership, communication and so on. For those needing a 'how-to' of culture management, this will be a section that is referred to repeatedly.

In Part IV, Zein offers his own approach to how the project manager can best manage the cultural diversity of a project team, which includes his concept of the 'culture soup' archetype of a project manager, one whose background is so varied that they have awareness of many aspects of values, habits, traits and personalities. Using this baseline, he offers an approach to management using the six steps of awareness, observation, association, validation, strategy and act.

Overall, Zein's book is a refreshingly smart and very accessible insight into what culture is, how it impacts on project management and how it can be managed and dealt with in real situations. Its lack of scholarly investigations and treatments means that many researchers in this area will find it too elementary, but the book is not pitched in this area. Instead, practicing project managers with experience, but possibly not effectiveness, in culture management will find the book very useful.

Simon Smith