

4.6: Creating a Project Culture

Project managers have a unique opportunity during the start-up of a project. They create a project culture, something organizational managers seldom have a chance to do. In most organizations, the corporate or organizational culture has developed over the life of the organization, and people associated with the organization understand what is valued, and what behaviors are expected. Edgar Schein defined culture as a pattern of basic assumptions formed by a group on how to perceive and address problems associated with both internal adaptation and external integration (Schein, 1990)^[1]. While organizational culture constrains, stabilizes, and provides structure to the organization, it is being constantly enacted, created, and shaped by leadership behavior.

A project culture represents the shared norms, beliefs, values, and assumptions of the project team. Understanding the unique aspects of a project culture and developing an appropriate culture to match the project are important project management abilities. Culture is developed through the communication of the priority, the given status, and the alignment of official and operational rules. Official rules are the rules that are stated, and operational rules are the rules that are enforced. Project managers who align official and operational rules are more effective in developing a clear and strong project culture because the project rules are among the first aspects of the project culture to which team members are exposed when assigned to the project. In addition to official and operational rules, the project leadership can communicate what is important by the use of symbols, storytelling, rituals, rewards or punishments, and taboos.

Operational Rules on a Project in India ^[2]

During the initiation of a project in India, members of the project team were given a policy that stated all travel expense claims must be submitted within three days of completion of travel. During the first few weeks, the administrative team began to understand that this was a difficult policy to enforce without creating moral problems on the project. Instead of changing the official rule, it was seldom enforced. The official rules and operational rules differed.

Later in the project, a worker was injured after crossing an area that was marked as unsafe. Workers indicated that they knew the official rules but it took too much time to go around the unsafe area. They assumed that official rules could be ignored if they were difficult to obey. The difference between official rules and operational rules of the project created a culture that made the communication of the priorities more difficult.

Creating a Culture of Safety ^[3]

A project manager in South America who wanted to create a strong safety culture on a construction project with significant safety concerns used several methods to create the desired culture. The very first meeting that project team members attended was a safety orientation. Members were issued a card—a symbol—after the meeting granting permission to participate in the project. The project leadership team told stories of previous projects where people were fired for breaking safety rules and often warned that the fastest way to get fired on the project was to break a safety rule—an example of storytelling. Every project meeting started with a discussion of a safety topic—a ritual—and any discussion of lessening the safety rules was forbidden—taboo—and was quickly and strongly cut off by the project leadership if it occurred.

As can be seen in both examples above, culture guides behavior and communicates what is important and is useful for establishing priorities. On projects that have a strong safety culture, team members feel free to challenge anyone who breaks a safety rule, even managers. The safety aspects of culture are stronger than the cultural aspects of the power of management.

Culture of Stakeholders

When project stakeholders do not share a common culture, project management must adapt its organizations and work processes to cope with cultural differences. Three major aspects of cultural difference that can affect a project are communications, negotiations, and decision-making. Communication is perhaps the most visible manifestation of culture. Project managers encounter cultural differences in communication in language, context, and candor. Language is clearly the highest barrier to communication. When project stakeholders do not share the same language, communication slows down and is often filtered to share only information that is deemed critical. The barrier to communication can influence project execution where quick and accurate exchange of ideas and information is critical. The interpretation of information reflects the extent that context and candor influence cultural expressions of ideas and understanding of information. In some cultures, an affirmative answer to a question does not always mean yes. The cultural influence can create confusion on a project where project stakeholders share more than one culture. It is of high importance to keep in mind that not all cultural differences are related to international projects. Corporate cultures and even regional differences can create cultural confusion on a project.

Culture Affects Communication in Mumbai ^[4]

A project management consultant from the United States was asked to evaluate the effectiveness of a U.S. project management team executing a project in Mumbai, India. The project team reported that the project was on schedule and within budget. After a project review meeting where each of the engineering leads reported that the design of the project was on schedule, the consultant began informal discussions with individual engineers and began to discover that several critical aspects of the project were behind schedule, and without a mitigating strategy, the project would miss a critical window in the weather between monsoon seasons. The information on the project flowed through a cultural expectation to provide positive information. The project was eventually canceled by the U.S.-based corporation when the market and political risks increased.

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1. Schein, E. H. (1990). Organizational culture (Vol. 45, No. 2, p. 109). American Psychological Association. ↵
 2. Retrieved from the OER titled "Principles of Management" on <https://openstax.org/books/principles-management/pages/13-1-the-nature-of-leadership>↵
 3. Retrieved from the OER titled "Principles of Management" on <https://openstax.org/books/principles-management/pages/13-1-the-nature-of-leadership>↵
 4. Retrieved from the OER titled "Project Management from Simple to Complex" on <https://open.lib.umn.edu/projectmanagement/chapter/5-3-creating-a-project-culture/>↵
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