Culture-Induced COMPLEXITY
What Every Project and Program Manager Needs to Know

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Introduction

In a paper presented at the 2008 PMI NA Congress, I urged project managers to increase their awareness of how culture influences human behavior, especially in teams. The chief message was that project managers need to develop this capability to “signature skill” level, because the emerging global, multicultural environment is quickly becoming the new normal for the profession. Project managers without the cultural intelligence to pick up the pertinent behavioral nuances of interacting across organizational and cultural boundaries are quickly becoming disadvantaged. Since that time, I’ve explored and learned more about the real underlying factor culture plays in leadership and management in today’s globalized environment. That factor is complexity.

PMI provided guidance in recognizing and dealing with elements of complexity in *Navigating Complexity: A Practice Guide* (PMI, 2014). The practice guide provides project, program and portfolio managers and their organizations practical ways to uncover and deal with elements of complexity in projects and programs. The practice guide defines complexity as a characteristic of a project or program or its environment that is difficult to manage because of **human behavior**, **system behavior** and **ambiguity**. This paper examines the role culture, in its broad definition, plays in the human behavior and ambiguity aspects of complexity. Although culture might contribute to complexity in the system domain—primarily around rules of engagement and possibly some human activities—cultural diversity is typically not a major contributor to system behavior.

An iceberg is a common metaphor for the complexity of culture and cultural interaction. **Figure 1** shows that above the waterline, you can find the observable attributes such as eating habits, dress, architecture, language, and so forth. However, values, attitudes and beliefs are those aspects of a culture we cannot easily observe and, therefore, are below the waterline. Understanding, and most importantly, ascertaining the below-the-waterline aspects of culture are what drive the increased complexity factor for project and program managers, especially in large, globalized initiatives. Overlay the need to operate almost exclusively in a virtual mode and often across time zones, and you have this paper’s theme: cultural interaction is a significant source of human behavior complexity in projects and programs.

**Definition of culture**

Culture is sometimes defined as shared mental programs that condition people’s responses to their environment (Hofstede, 2001). Under this definition, one sees culture in everyday personal and organizational behaviors, but deeply embedded mental programs control behavior. Therefore, culture is not just a set of surface behaviors—
it is deeply embedded in each individual. These surface features of social behavior (i.e., mannerisms, ways of speaking, manners of dress) often manifest deep, culturally based values and principles.

Some basic characteristics apply:

- **Culture is shared.** It is something a group has in common that is not typically available to people outside it. Common mental programming enables insiders to interact with one another with a special understanding that is not grasped by outsiders.

- **Culture is learned and enduring.** A group’s mental programming is learned by its members over long periods. Some cultural aspects, such as religious beliefs, systems of land ownership, and forms of marriage, are built into institutions.

- **Culture is a powerful influence on behavior.** Escaping one’s culture is difficult, even when desired. The mental programming involved is strong. Even when questioning the rationality of some aspects of the culture, one mentally reverts to cultural roots.

- **Culture is systematic and organized.** Culture is an organized system of values, attitudes, beliefs, and meanings related to one another and to the environmental context. Because of the mental programming culture imposes, others’ cultures often seem strange and illogical.

- **Culture is largely invisible.** What we see of culture is expressed in living artifacts, but much of it is hidden in the same way most of an iceberg is below the waterline (see Figure 1). The invisible cultural elements, such as underlying values, social structures and ways of thinking are most important.

- **Culture can be tight or loose.** Cultures differ from one another, not just in details, but also in pervasiveness. For example, a hierarchical organization such as a financial institution with its risk-averse orientation could be described as “tight.” On the other hand, a highly matrixed organization such as a consulting firm with its more risk-tolerant orientation could be described as “loose.”

**Definition of cultural intelligence**

Cultural intelligence means being skilled and flexible about understanding a culture; learning more about it through ongoing interactions; gradually reshaping thinking to be more sympathetic to it; and to act appropriately within it.

Cultural intelligence has three parts:

1. The **knowledge** of culture and of fundamental principles of cross-cultural interactions, which means knowing what culture is, how cultures vary, and how culture affects behavior.

2. The **mindfulness** to pay attention in a reflective and creative way to cues in the cross-cultural situation.

3. The **behavioral skills** that involve choosing the appropriate behavior from a well-developed repertoire of behaviors corresponding to different intercultural situations.
The best way to visualize how these three elements interact is through three overlapping circles (as shown in Figure 2) where cultural quotient is the intersection of all three components.

**Project management context**

The need to be culturally intelligent is not new in the project management world; but, it has become more pronounced as diversity in teams continues to increase. As with most concepts or approaches, one will naturally be at different levels of knowledge or competency at different career stages. The concept of Six Sigma belts as a measure of mastery can establish the level of cultural intelligence in this hierarchy:

- Green Belt—basic knowledge of the other culture
- Black Belt—rich understanding of the other culture and differences from the native culture
- Master Black Belt—ability to interpret cultural behavior under circumstances of change

The key aspect is to be mindful of a cultural quotient’s situational nature. The required cultural quotient level depends on the project assignment’s duration and complexity.

![Figure 2: The three elements of the cultural quotient.](image-url)
The Cultural Dimension

For a project or program manager, culture matters. Its impact on leadership style and the need for communication and facilitation skills are now more critical than ever for success.

**Why cultural competency matters**

Business in the 21st century is global. The need to deal effectively with others who are culturally diverse has become a business necessity. This globalization is fueled by dramatic economic shifts in many countries and by advances in communications technology. Not everyone travels the globe to do business, but the world has come to us. Daily, we deal with international issues and interact with people from other countries and cultures.

Despite this rapid globalization, culture is slow to change. For the near future, cultural differences will remain a key factor in personal interactions, and it has long been known that interacting effectively with others is the most important part of a project or program manager’s job.

In an increasingly competitive world, project and program managers who do not keep their skills up to date risk losing their ability to successfully lead. Cultural quotient—the capability to deal effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds—is a multifaceted competency consisting of cultural knowledge, the practice of mindfulness and a repertoire of behavioral skills. Cultural quotient is developed experientially and intuitively, such that each repetition builds on the previous experience.

The feedback from each experience cycle leads to an ever-higher cultural competency. Specific knowledge gained formally and informally is transformed into skills that can then be applied to many new situations. In the work world, there are two emerging realities for project and program managers:

1. **Globalization has changed the game.** Everyone lives increasingly global lives—project and program managers more than most. This means an increase in the permeability of traditional boundaries, including those around countries, economies, industries and organizations. Even when confined to a single country or continent, project and program managers will encounter aspects of globalization. It is highly likely (and often desirable) that the project or program team has a diverse collection of cultural influences, even in a domestic team.

   Even small firms now have global capability. With a computer and an Internet connection it is possible to be a global business almost instantly. This makes the business environment more complex, dynamic, uncertain and competitive than ever. Even more, tomorrow's project and program managers will have to learn to compete and work globally.

2. **New leadership paradigm—Culture matters.** Culture profoundly influences most aspects of human behavior. The culturally competent project or program manager understands the possible effects of cultural variation in his or her behavior and that of others. The culturally competent manager also knows how—and in what circumstances—these differences are likely to exert their effect. Culture matters—but not to the same degree in all circumstances, at all times.
The leadership perspective

Leadership is the ability to influence others to reach common goals; but, different leaders influence followers differently. A leader might capture some followers’ loyalty while being rejected and ridiculed by others. A style that works perfectly in one situation could fall flat in another.

Leadership is defined in this paper in terms of influence and anyone—regardless of position in the organization or on the project team—can exercise influence. Therefore, in understanding how leadership works across cultures, one must carefully look at every participant or stakeholder to understand how he or she might understand the situation. Cultural differences in leadership expectations affect the perception of who the leader is. Different cultures have different prototypes of what a leader should be. A leader who can meet followers’ expectations can expect to develop their trust and build relationships. To be a culturally competent leader, one must use knowledge and mindfulness to develop a repertoire of behaviors adaptable to these situations.

Communicating effectively across cultures

Communicating effectively across cultures requires some common framework, especially for the team. Language is essential, but culture is a vast subject. There are an almost infinite number of possible values, norms, and behaviors. The works of thought leaders such as Hofstede (2001) and Trompenaars (2001, 2012) have provided a basis to establish a set of cultural orientations and dimensions that will impact your communication strategy and approach.

Differentiating between major cultural thinking and behavioral styles

A cultural orientation is an inclination to think, feel or act in a culturally determined way. For example, some people communicate directly, saying what they mean and meaning what they say. Their cultural orientation then is “direct communication,” in contrast with others whose style is typically more indirect.

Rosinski (2003) lays out an approach called the Cultural Orientation Framework (COF). This framework provides a useful tool for project and program managers to assess cultural differences and ultimately leverage cultural diversity.

There are seven major categories. The dimensions in each help reveal the nature and range of the cultural orientation:

1. Sense of power and responsibility: Reveals the control, harmony and humility dimensions. The continuum ranges from being driven by a determinant power to forge a desired outcome to a more passive acceptance of natural limitations.

2. Time management approaches: Reveals three sets of dimensions on time. These perspectives revolve around the contrasts between: scarcity versus plentiful; single task versus multitask; and, innate biases around past, present or future focus.

3. Definitions of identity and purpose: Reveal the being/doing and individual/collectivistic dimensions influencing individuals or groups in the workplace. The former clarifies one’s focus whereas the latter clarifies one’s orientation regarding the team.
4. Organizational arrangements: Reveal four sets of dimensions on how the organization is viewed. These perspectives revolve around the contrasts between: hierarchy and equality; centralization and decentralization; stability and change; and, competitiveness versus collaboration.

5. Notions of territory and boundaries: Reveal the protective versus sharing inclination especially around personal information with colleagues.

6. Communication patterns: Reveal four sets of dimensions on how people communicate. The perspectives on this domain revolve around the contrast between: high context (implicit) and low context (explicit); direct and indirect; emotional and non-emotional; and, formal and informal.

7. Modes of thinking: Reveal the deductive/inductive and analytical/systemic dimensions of how people think in the workplace. The former differentiates between conceptual versus experiential approaches, whereas the latter differentiates between starting with the whole versus with the parts of a situation.

**Managing cross-cultural virtual teams**

A new business opportunity can force a project or program manager into a cultural soup within hours. An additional impact on this environment is working virtually without the benefit of facial expressions or body language cues. It is one thing to aspire to function at Stage 5 of the Thomas and Inkson (2009) model discussed on page 18 of this paper; it is another to do it without having met the team members and never seeing their body language. Managing the virtual environment effectively is part of sound facilitative leadership as it adds an additional layer of complexity on top of the cultural diversity element.

Despite the hype about virtual teams, people work better together when they are in close, physical proximity. There are major challenges with any team formation and operation. However, in the virtual environment the following can become more pronounced:

- Cross-cultural differences
- Time differences: It is more difficult to coordinate working in different time zones, with different holiday and vacation calendars.
- Communication: Most communication is nonverbal and gets lost when the communication is by email or phone. Misunderstandings and miscommunication are more likely to occur.
- Coordination: Project work requires countless small adjustments. In collocated teams, these adjustments can be done quickly and informally.
- Cohesion barriers: Collocated groups develop closer bonds, and are more likely to trust one another, help one another and work harder for one another. Because this bonding happens in informal settings and needs nonverbal communication, it is much more difficult to develop in virtual teams.
- Control: "Out of sight, out of mind" is a major challenge for all virtual managers. Control efforts without seeing, observing and having face-to-face dialogues with the team are less effective. The result is more duplication of efforts, late discovery of problems and more rework.
Here are eight practical rules for leading in the virtual environment.

**Rule 1—Create a trustful environment.** Whenever one leads a virtual team, he or she has little to no authority or immediate control over the team members. One must trust that the team members are doing the job perfectly. A best practice approach is to create trustworthy relationships. Therefore, every step in the project or program must deepen the trust:

- In the leader of the virtual team;
- In the value of the virtual project; and
- Between all virtual team members.

Trust all team members, especially in the beginning. If the leader demonstrates trust, then the team members are likely to develop trust with each other. Trust requires leadership to set and maintain values, boundaries and consistency.

**Rule 2—Establish meaningful team-specific symbols.** Because virtual teams are not at the same place of work, establish meaningful symbols so the team members feel connected closely, even over a distance.

- If possible, have a face-to-face kickoff meeting, or at least a videoconference.
- Make sure that all team members understand the personal benefits they’ll get from being part of this team.
- Be creative in finding recognitions and rewards to show appreciation for the performance of individuals and the team.

**Rule 3—Facilitate opportunities for team members to get to know one another.** Because virtual team members have only limited personal contact, make sure they have the opportunity to learn more about each other.

- Provide a full profile of each team member, covering professional and private aspects (if team members wish to share this information and be recognized).
- Have a monthly project newsletter with a wide range of contributors. If possible, arrange at least an annual meeting of the project team if the project or program lifecycle extends over a long period of time.
- Have a short, personal, informal meeting with the team regularly to discuss problems and obtain feedback.
- Encourage team members to organize themselves into smaller workgroups of two to three people to work on some project areas.
- Encourage team members to bring ideas forward. Appreciate all team members’ ideas. Make sure that all responses to the ideas are perceived as fair.
Rule 4—Create a clear vision. With virtual teams, sometimes there are breakdowns and loss of motivation after face-to-face meetings. To prevent this:

- Create clear and understandable goals so all team members know the team objectives.
- Create strong emotional relationships on a personal level that work across long distances.
- Develop and share a clear vision of both what “good” looks like in terms of team performance and the fundamental purpose of the team. A clear and shared vision can significantly reduce the negative impact of volatility and ultimately complexity. Volatility can be almost harmless if team members are anchored in a believable, well-articulated vision.

Rule 5—Treat everyone equally, regardless of distance. All team members should feel fairly treated, regardless of whether they are close or distant. If one team member is perceived as getting special treatment, this can damage the level of trust and confidence quickly.

- Avoid the temptation to have more contact with team members who are physically closer.
- Treat the needs of all team members alike.
- Give everyone the opportunity to be seen and contribute meaningfully to the team’s achievements.
- Respond immediately to poor performance. Correct unacceptable performance and behavior despite the long distances to bridge.
- Act predictably and fairly; make sure all members are fully responsible for their acts and performances.
- Demonstrate fairness by spreading the challenge of working across time zones by making sure—to the greatest extent possible—that no one is burdened with having really early or really late calls all the time.

Rule 6—Use multichannel communications. Ineffective communication and uneven distribution of information can quickly destroy the trust in a virtual team. Problems are sometimes hidden for several months before they become visible. During this time, they slow progress and reduce the productivity of the virtual team and project. Therefore, make sure that communication is clear and effective by:

- Including visual clues—pictures, graphics, diagrams, tables
- Including tangible clues—things to touch, sense or experience
- Including verbal clues—details, analysis, comparisons, examples, processes
- Capturing key points and decisions in writing. Circulating them to the team and allowing for elaboration and clarification will help remove communication barriers.
Practicing the principle of shared meaning in all communications. Shared meaning is based on the concept that all of us use mental maps or models to make sense of our environment. When we assume the receiver of our communication is using a similar mental model to ours, we run the risk of not having the same meaning. While shared meaning does not mean agreement, it does communicate we understand the term or concept in the same way, thereby reducing complexity.

**Rule 7—Make it safe.** Virtual teams are forced to interact in an environment with a significantly reduced number of visual cues (e.g., body language and facial expressions). While this can be mitigated through the smart use of technology, it does not totally replicate the face-to-face environment. Having to rely on mostly auditory cues increases uncertainty and hesitancy to speak up or contribute. By creating a safe environment, a virtual team leader is signaling his or her intent to surface the facts and complete picture before making decisions or taking action. Actions that aid in effective decision making and promote a feeling of safety in sharing include:

- Allowing for back channel communications in order to connect with individuals who may not be willing to share information in a team setting for fear they may be wrong or off-base.
- Providing a mechanism to allow people to voice their thoughts, concerns, etc. offline and provide coaching to help them bring relevant information to the team for consideration.
- Providing coaching to help team members bring relevant information to the team for consideration.

**Rule 8—Maintain disciplined attention.** A virtual team needs to guard against distractions that can multiply with diverse members, priorities and distance, and add to the complexity factor. It is important to develop strategies to minimize distractions. Staying focused on the work is aided by communication and technology strategies. The key principle of working in adaptive environments is to guide the flow of dialogue and interaction. Duarte and Snyder (2006) note that, “[m]aintaining disciplined attention entails getting teams past hurdles and on to discussing the right things with the right people, often in unexpected places” (p. 534).

- Effective virtual team leadership requires a relentless focus on removing obstacles and distractions, rather than being the source of all the answers or knowledge.
- Watch out for distractions that a team can create for itself by denying problems, passing the buck, and changing the subject to technical details and solutions that keep the team suspended in an unceasing technical state.
- Watch out for a technical organization’s tendency to use hierarchy and overly structured processes in an attempt to control virtual teams.

It is the program or project manager’s responsibility to ensure that the communication flows are effective within the team. The communication management plan is a good support tool for this.

**Next steps in personal development**

Regardless of the level achieved within the five stages discussed later, developing cultural competence requires additional reading, experimentation and practice of the newly acquired behaviors. Although an assignment in a new cultural environment is the best way to develop this aspect of one’s career, there are many excellent books and publications to assist in broadening this horizon before encountering a new culture.
Re-positioning the Cultural Quotient

Intelligence quotient is a threshold competency that must be developed to some baseline level for success in business. The distinguishing competencies that set one apart and make the difference in your career and success are the emotional, cultural and passion quotients.

- Emotional quotient is the capacity to manage how one interacts with others on the personal level.
- Cultural quotient is the willingness and capacity to seek knowledge of how to effectively connect with other cultures.
- Passion quotient is a perspective on the desire and focus to persevere toward a goal or objective, even when facing resistance and obstacles. The intensity of this perseverance in the face of resistance is calibrated through one’s mindsets or mental models formed and held about the world.

Think of a mindset as a perspective one automatically moves to when interacting with the environment. A more formal definition of perspective would simply be a viewpoint about a subject or observed object. Once this perspective is established and held for a period, it creates a frame of reference for the subject of attention. After a period, this boxed-in perspective hardens into a specific viewpoint—or mental model—often called a mindset.

A mindset can either enable or disable success or progress. A relevant example of a disabling mindset for project and program managers is the belief that they are the smartest members of their team, as opposed to an enabling mindset or perspective of “we are the smartest as a collective whole.”

Project and program managers who believe they are the smartest team members exhibit a “diminisher” leadership style in which they treat people like a pair of hands, only focusing on compliance and, ultimately, only caring about the deliverable. Contrast that with those who believe that the collective “we” is the smartest. They believe that their role as leaders is more to multiply what the team members bring to the table. They do this by facilitating, enabling dialogue and treating each team member as a partner engendering commitment not only to a deliverable, but also to an outcome, despite any resistance or obstacles. Ironically, team member attitudes—especially toward accountability—can vary directly with the team leader’s mindset around who is the smartest on the team.

The focus here is the collective synergistic impact of “we,” the meaning of “smartest,” and ultimately, defining “good.” Figure 3 maps the four elements of how one might look at the word smart in a simple four-box model (Richardson, 2014), including how to typically grow or develop smartness.
There is a difference between threshold competency and distinguishing competency. Threshold in this context means that one does not have to have a genius intelligence quotient to be effective. However, one must have minimum facility with the spoken and written words and have a good working knowledge of basic math. In this model’s THINKING quadrant, the “diminisher” leader’s basis for self-appointed, top-of-the-totem-pole intelligence is most likely based on educational credentials and, in some cases, relative marks and awards. Goleman (1995) tells an interesting story in his lectures about the non-correlation of SAT scores and success. He describes it as nonexistent, which helps illustrate the minimal role raw intellectual horsepower plays in leadership impact. So what makes the difference?

The distinguishing set of competencies that answer this question can be summed in the often-quoted principle—people don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care. Simply put, the intelligence quotient represents the first part—how much one knows. The emotional, cultural and passion quotients address the second part—how much one cares. Leadership is authentic influence that creates value. One influences followers by mobilizing them toward a shared purpose, with a definitive roadmap; set of priorities; and, most importantly, shared ownership.

The “diminisher” equation is simple: “If I as the project or program manager am unsuccessful in mobilizing you as a team member toward a shared purpose—either because you don’t trust me or because of lack of clarity on the purpose—you will be compliant and do exactly what I request, or perhaps suggest, but no more. Because I have not connected with you, respected your diversity or culture, or engaged your passions, you hesitate to commit to shared ownership of the problem or opportunity. All I get is a pair of hands, not a partner.”

Since most would agree that this isn’t an acceptable way to lead a team, it begs the question, how can we avoid this scenario? The following three key strategies address this common leadership error.

**The connecting quadrant**

Think of emotional quotient as a strategy to tune in to the same emotional frequency as the team members. Emotionality is a universal language or conduit for connecting and requires focus on self-awareness and self-management, and awareness of the emotions of other individuals and teams. It is often gained through personal experience and trial and error, rather than by being taught as part of a formal education.

As with improving any soft skill, there is a mindset, skill set and tool set component to progress. The mindset component revolves around buying into a simple rule—the emotional tail wags the rational dog. The “diminisher” leader persists in believing that his or her intellectual brilliance or strong rational argument will be persuasive and compelling. The “multiplier” leader recognizes that people are more apt to decide whether they will be compliant or committed based on how they feel, as opposed to what they think. Strong base needs around acknowledgment, contribution and feeling are the reasons why.

An example of this quadrant in play would be a project manager mystified about why his or her offshore vendor development team resists a proposed deadline for the next code delivery. The project manager—a “diminisher” type of leader—has predetermined how long it should take to design, code and test the next segment; furthermore, the offshore team consists of vendors who are supposed to do as they are directed. Aside from a number of cross-cultural faux pas, the project manager has not attempted to connect with the team of vendors primarily because of a disabling mindset about vendors—that is, they are a pair of hands, not a partner. A “multiplier” project manager would have factored in the need to connect with the offshore team by paying
attention to what they valued and needed for success and, as will be seen in the Respecting quadrant, the complementary perspective on the diversity of culture.

Expect resistance as you slowly develop your capability to manage both your own emotionality and that of others. The success formula is to persist, take advantage of every opportunity to practice, and, above all, welcome feedback.

The respecting quadrant

This quadrant involves understanding one’s mindset toward diversity or, more precisely, people who differ from oneself. As outlined earlier, the cultural quotient, or cultural intelligence, refers to a project or program manager’s ability to demonstrate three core elements or behaviors: (1) knowledge of the culture and its specific characteristics; (2) mindfulness of its particular norms and customs; and, (3) willingness and ability to practice expected behaviors.

For example, a project manager is expected to have researched and know that respect for the boss/subordinate hierarchy will be a key to how a team member on a virtual cross-cultural team might frame and pursue a problem’s escalation. This hierarchy is influenced by what Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) called the “power distance index.” Lower power distance organizations tend toward democratic decision making and shared authority. Higher power distance organizations tend toward hierarchical structures and more autocratic decision-making approaches.

Knowing about the impact of the power distance index on how a problem needs to be escalated could be the difference between building up and tearing down a key business or project relationship. It also illustrates how culture incrementally adds a clear level of complexity over what might be considered standard business or management practice.

In this quadrant, “smartness” means knowing how to avoid perception as ignorant or arrogant. Specifically, if one’s cross-cultural client perceives that one is ignorant of his or her cultural norm, the client will intuitively—and often unfairly—attribute the ignorance as disrespect for his or her culture, despite whether it is ethnicity or organization based. It is strongly possible that the client will interpret one’s ignorance of the cultural norm as a lack of interest, which is interpreted as arrogance. In either case, one loses from a relationship-building viewpoint and telegraphs his or her diminishing leadership approach. Both of these unfavorable outcomes radiate from the cultural dimension and its attendant below-the-waterline aspects, either hidden or obscured by disabling mindsets and experiences.

The engaging quadrant

One of the ways employee engagement is often defined is as the employees’ level of mental and emotional investment in their work and how it contributes to their employer’s success. In addition to being proactive, engaged employees go the extra mile for customers and step forward to solve problems and try new things. This pride in producing quality outcomes stems from the passion quotient.

Although it is used in many contexts, Friedman (2005) states that one’s curiosity and passion for learning and growth are far more predictive of success than the intelligence quotient; he promotes that passion and curiosity are key components for education in a world where information is readily available to everyone and where
global markets reward those who have learned how to learn and—most importantly—who are motivated to learn. This point should be the most significant takeaway for this quadrant, as it ties directly into one’s personal brand, and it will set one apart as a caring and inspirational “multiplier.” Multipliers regard people on their team as valuable human beings who bring a rich combination of energy, perspectives, knowledge and passions to the table. Their mission is to literally multiply or leverage—not diminish—these unique ingredients as the birthplaces of synergy and creativity.

Consider that a program manager, fully engaged in learning about how culture—whether it is ethnicity or organizational based—injects a level of complexity into communications and daily interaction with stakeholders. He or she invests energy and time into resetting any mindsets that inhibit progress and develops underformed skill sets such as framing and re-framing and acquiring new innovative tools such as Rosinski’s (2003) Cultural Orientation Framework for influencing in a virtual, cross-cultural environment. Consider how a program manager, cognizant of the impact of a strong personal brand, places high value on delivering on his or her promises and establishing a solid reputation for effectively leading virtual, cross-cultural, cross-functional teams. The drive and energy required to be a high impact, value-creating program manager come from his or her personal passion quotient and its catalytic impact on the other three quadrants in this segment.

Now, consider if one is not like this program manager!

This four-box model is a reminder that one’s intellect is only one of four critical elements required to manage projects and programs effectively. Although intelligence quotient is a threshold competency to get in the game, emotional, cultural and passion quotient components determine how long one stays in the game. Remember, people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. Not by accident, three strategies in this model focus in some way on caring or doing, whereas only one focuses on knowing. In today’s globalized, multicultural environment, business professionals need to continually invest in growing and protecting each of these four dimensions of personal success and learn how to multiply—not diminish—their value.
Re-framing Complexity into a Larger Context

In the emerging global business environment everyone is challenged with adapting to a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment where the project or program manager models supportive, team-based behaviors while respecting his or her professional commitment to governance and value creation. Adaptability—the willingness and ability to adjust oneself to changing conditions and environments—is part of a broader skill family commonly called flexibility. A flexible project or program manager, in addition to being adaptable, demonstrates the following key attributes:

- Keeping calm in the face of difficulties
- Planning ahead, but having alternative options in case things go wrong
- Thinking quickly to respond to sudden changes in circumstances
- Persisting in the face of unexpected difficulties
- Anticipating and responding positively to changing environments
- Adapting to change positively in response to changing circumstances
- Taking on new challenges at short notice
- Dealing with changing priorities/workloads

To this point this paper has established the cultural dimension, which further intensifies an already complex aspect of project management today—the human behavior element. With flexibility emerging as a foundational project management skill set, this segment addresses the conditions and the environment driving the need for greater flexibility, but not at the cost of innovation, creativity and out-of-the-box thinking.

Navigating cultural complexity

Navigating Complexity: A Practice Guide (PMI, 2014) reinforces adaptability as a foundational skill with which a project or program manager needs to adjust to a changing environment or situation and to adopt a flexible approach that shifts according to the situation. A notable aspect of the practice guide is how it frames human behavior as a source of complexity from the interplay of conducts, demeanors and attitudes, all of which are influenced by culture and working virtually across organizational and geographical boundaries. Examples cited of complexity-inducing behaviors for example, clients who offer gifts to have their deliverables expedited and stakeholders who misunderstand goals and desired outcomes, can easily be connected back to some cultural context. Project and program managers must proactively seek the necessary information about the diversity of the cultures represented in the stakeholder group. This ties back directly to the three elements of cultural intelligence: knowledge, mindfulness and behavior. Each of these elements needs to be proactively pursued and practiced regardless of whether or not foreign countries are involved.

The practice guide identifies ambiguity—being unclear and not knowing what to expect—as a common aspect of complexity. Not only does ambiguity lead to lack of commitment, it can also lead to uncertainty—being unsure of or not knowing an issue or situation. Uncertainty is deadly for team cohesiveness and alignment, especially when it is caused by lack of preparation or analysis by a project or program manager in a cultural orientation space. For example, assume a program manager is ignorant of cultural norms in a particular country around communication orientation. If the culture is a high-context culture, which means even the smallest gesture or voice tone carries great meaning, the team member might not respond well to the low-context style where
the meaning is conveyed directly in words with little attention paid to an interaction’s nonverbal elements. The potential result is uncertainty for both parties, which can easily be avoided.

As noted in the previous section, volatility is an important element for project and program managers in their role as vanguards of change, especially for large, global, cross-functional projects. Volatility is the characteristic of changing often and unpredictably. It would be difficult to pin down whether volatility is caused by complexity or whether the opposite is true. For the purpose of this paper, the culture–complexity relationship, Johansen (2012) succinctly spells out the antidote—“volatility yields to vision” (p. 72). For example, as a stakeholder, if one understands and buys into a vision of what the deliverable looks like, one will not be negatively affected by the volatility, regardless of how changing or unpredictable the environment might become. Conversely, if a project manager is unable or unwilling for any reason to frame the vision, the stakeholder’s anxiety about volatility will be elevated, as will his or her anxiety over other related complexity elements such as lack of cultural sensitivity. The stakeholder’s elevated anxiety might affect other stakeholders and eventually lead, at a minimum, to a troubled project or, worse case, a failed project. Project management is a team game!

A key message for project and program managers is that volatility can be mitigated through effective application of visioning and consistent transparency. Flexibility, which includes adaptability, will continue as a differentiator for project management success, especially in cross-cultural and cross-organizational boundary initiatives.
Summary and the Way Forward

Complexity is recognized as a variable in project management success and stems from human behavior, system behavior and ambiguity (PMI, 2014). For the human behavior component, culture in itself is complex and often undervalued by most stakeholders. Project and program managers have a unique opportunity to mitigate the inherent complexities of culture by building awareness and expertise in both themselves and their teams. Their cultural capability will come from both personal study of experts in the field, specific literature on specific countries or organizations and hands-on experience in different cultural settings. This investment, coupled with application of the broader framework for complexity contained in *Navigating Complexity: A Practice Guide* (PMI, 2014), will result in more predictable project results and a more effective introduction of change.

**Making cultural intelligence a signature skill**

Thomas and Inkson (2009) articulate five stages for developing cultural intelligence:

- **Stage 1—Reactivity to external stimuli.** The typical starting point is mindless adherence to one’s cultural rules and norms. At this stage, one is on cultural “autopilot.”

- **Stage 2—Recognition of other cultural norms.** Experience and mindfulness expand our awareness of the multicultural mosaic around us. At this stage, a simple rule of thumb or heuristics can help guide behavior.

- **Stage 3—Accommodation of other cultural norms and rules in our minds.** Reliance on absolutes disappears and deeper understanding of cultural variation begins to develop. At this stage, one knows what to say or do, but it does not come naturally.

- **Stage 4—Assimilation of diverse cultural norms into alternative behavior.** At this stage, adjusting to different situations no longer requires as much effort. One develops a repertoire of behaviors from which he or she can choose depending on the specific cultural situation. At this stage, one feels at home in most relevant situations.

- **Stage 5—Proactivity in cultural behavior is based on recognition of changing cues that others do not perceive.** At this stage, knowing what behaviors are required and how to execute them effectively is intuitive. At this stage, one operates at a level of cultural intelligence that might be rare, but is certainly an appropriate level of aspiration.

The first step in determining how to develop cultural intelligence is determined by where one is today, potentially using this five-stage model as a framework. Despite where one falls, a key task of a project or program manager is to also develop cultural intelligence with every member of the project team. The T.E.A.M. (Richardson, 2006) approach (see Table 1) is useful for introducing any new skill set or change to team members.
The best way to fully understand a subject or concept is to teach it to someone else as soon as it has been learned. With cultural quotient, this means teaching this material to team members, starting with the basics.

As a transformational or facilitative leader, a chief objective is to build capacity in the team. In the early stages of building capacity, lay out the expectation that cultural aspects in the team must be looked at with a different mental model.

As a leader, anchor a new concept or idea by providing people with simplified job aids and templates that clarify and simplify the new expected behavior. This could be something as simple as a laminated job aid depicting the three overlapping circles in Figure 2.

There is no better way to demonstrate commitment and professionalism as a leader than to show daily use or application of cultural quotient in project activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teach it</th>
<th>The best way to fully understand a subject or concept is to teach it to someone else as soon as it has been learned. With cultural quotient, this means teaching this material to team members, starting with the basics.</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Model it</td>
<td>There is no better way to demonstrate commitment and professionalism as a leader than to show daily use or application of cultural quotient in project activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The four steps of T.E.A.M.

Not paying attention to how the cultural dimension adds significant complexity exposes the project or program manager, the team and the sponsor to unnecessary risks. Examples of these risks include lack of stakeholder commitment/engagement, evaporating stakeholder alignment and dysfunctional team behaviors. These risks can be minimized by:

- Refreshing knowledge about the cultural dimension
- Re-positioning culture in relation to the emotional and intelligence quotients
- Re-framing complexity into a larger leadership and organizational context

The bottom line is that project and program managers need to recognize and respect the complexity introduced by culture.
References


