

Training for construction site managers involved with multicultural work teams

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The success of construction projects, whether it is accomplished in the country of the organization or beyond its border, is determined in the main by the quality of its management. Projects which are carried out beyond national borders may create special problems for managers, such as dealing with multiethnic work teams, operating within local laws, regulations, social customs and importing materials. This increases the pressure upon managers and requires particular qualities and understanding in order to achieve their target in the most economical way. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of cross-cultural training for construction site managers who are involved with multicultural work forces in the Middle East.

Keywords: training, site manager, culture, work team, Middle East

In the Middle East, most construction projects have work forces that come from more than one country, for instance: Pakistan, India, Turkey, Egypt, the Philippines and Thailand. This composition shows differences in language, attitudes, values, religion and education. Such situations pose great difficulties, not only to managers with western backgrounds, but also to

local ones. However, the problems met by western managers are greater because they have been brought up in a completely different environment, usually with work experience gained in developed countries.

The cultural diversities within multicultural work teams are staggering. The inability to cope with a myriad of cultural differences can undoubtedly reduce site managers' effectiveness, which can lead not only to wastage of valuable resources and a diminution in productivity, but also a delay in completion of projects. This may lead to serious disruption and financial losses to multinational organizations.

For many years, the Arab countries have been the largest and most productive market for international construction organizations. Although there was a dramatic fall in the oil price, the Middle East market remained one of the most important markets for international contractors. Currently, many local construction companies have developed the potential to compete with international ones in the Middle East, which creates even fiercer competition.

It has been suggested¹ that 50% of the cost of a construction project goes on the manpower inputs, emphasizing the importance of considering the manpower element. This is particularly important in the Middle East, as there is a shortage of manpower (skill and labour) which forces the local and international contractors to use and import work forces from several developing countries. Therefore in work situations where several cultures are involved, there is a pressing

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need to recognize and consider cross-cultural training as an integral part of construction management development if organizations are to remain competitive and successful. Cultural training gives site managers new information and new behaviour skills for work forces with diverse cultural backgrounds, so that conflicts and misunderstandings can be diminished. Consequently, harmonious interpersonal relationships can more readily be maintained, and the effectiveness of site managers and productivity of work forces will be increased. The discussion in this paper is based on empirical research conducted by the authors².

IS MANAGEMENT UNIVERSAL?

There is still a debate surrounding the universality of management theory and its applications across cultures. On the one hand, several scholars believe that management varies from one culture to another, and therefore managerial application should be adapted to the new situation³. On the other hand, other scholars believe that management theory and practice can be applied in every culture and situation without a need for adaptation to specific cultures⁴.

The major cross-cultural schools which have been used to interpret and demonstrate the differences and similarities in the applicability of management are: universal, economic, psychological, sociological and cultural schools^{5,6}, and these will be briefly discussed.

Universal school

The concept of this school is that no differences exist in managerial behaviour across cultures. The argument in this school holds that the manager's behaviour should be the same, despite cultural variation, when the functions are the same. Writers who support this school are Likert⁷ and Mouton and Blake⁸. Child⁹ reported that organizations became gradually similar across cultures; he suggested that it would be more appropriate to establish universal theories for and practices in the management of multicultural organizations.

This concept contradicts cultural scholars¹⁰⁻¹³ who put a great emphasis on the impact of culture upon managerial differences; this will be discussed later when we consider the cultural school. The universal school contrasts also with the scholars of economics¹⁴⁻¹⁶ who state that the level of industrialization has an influence on managerial practice.

However, management principle is universal in particular areas, which has been identified by Koontz¹⁷ as 'management science'. Koontz suggested that these areas where the management could be global are: network planning, utilization of rate-of-return on investment and variable budgeting. However, Koontz failed to separate management science, which is certainly fundamental for managerial practice, and behaviour, which may require some adjustment and modification to suit other cultures.

The universal school builds its assumption on the fact that the differences between managerial approaches are attributed to individuals' perception and organizational differences rather than variations in cultural background.

Economic school

This school of thought considers that the nation's economic and industrial development affects managerial behaviour. It relates the differences in managerial behaviour across countries to the level of economic development and industrialization. Veblen¹⁴ is one of the earlier scholars of economics who suggested that 'machine process' or level of technology is the main determinant of managerial behaviour. Kerr and others (Reference 15, p 33) define industrialization as: 'The actual course of transition from the traditional society towards industrialism'.

The school of economics puts a considerable emphasis on the impact of industrialization level on managerial practice. The scholars of economics argue that 'since all modern societies, by necessity, must obey the logic of imperatives of industrialization, differences in managerial behaviours and practices among nations can best be explained by their level of economic development' (Reference 5, p 157). Kerr and others¹⁵ believe that the level of economic evolution in addition to the stage and progress of industrialization has a considerable effect on managerial behaviours. Although those scholars do not dispute the effect of culture on management style, they insist that industrial development has the most powerful impact on managerial practice⁵. Kerr and others¹⁵ place confidence in the concept that managers, irrespective of their cultures, will tend to behave alike in similar economic situations. On the other hand, managers who work in different or changeable economic environments will operate differently.

Negandhi¹⁶ argued for industrial and technological diversity as the predominant effect of managerial differences. He reported that variations in management practice and style across countries exist, but there is a move in his study to explain the diversity in terms of technological and economic discrepancies rather than cultural variable.

The scholars who support the economic school think that 'international differences in management will be eliminated as nations of the world converge and become equally industrialized and as managers everywhere are forced to use the same methods and tools in the performance of their managerial duties' (Reference 5, p 157). Hofstede¹⁸ found in his research, which has been carried out in 40 countries around the globe, that leadership style varies from one country to another regardless of the economic situation.

With respect to the Middle East, where all construction and building firms have to employ a work force containing third country nationals due to the lack of skill and availability in the host countries, the situation will be a complex one. It is complex because such a work force is drawn from several countries, and the degree of economical development varies from one country to another. The question which arises here is: what should the management style be?, or according to which economic situation will the site manager tend to behave in such complex organizations? Is it dictated by the site manager's home country, or the host country, or a third country from which the work force may have been drawn?

Fiedler (quoted in Reference 18, p 57) pointed out that there is a need for a different leadership style for

different types of situation; he added 'that the cultural gap between supervisor and subordinates is one of the factors that makes a situation different'. The culturalists and psychologists believe that 'managerial differences will remain a permanent feature of management around the world as long as differences in culture and personality abound' (Reference 5, p 157).

Psychological school

Personality traits, e.g. 'achievement motivation' and 'inferiority complex', have a considerable impact on managerial differences among nations⁵. Having said that, it can be argued that psychological features are just an extension of cultural phenomena^{4,19}. The characteristics of a man's personality vary from one society to another, also within the same society; this variation is contingent on the level of a person's experience toward the close or complete environment.

McClelland²⁰ investigated the association between economic growth and the predominant psychological factor (achievement motivation) in several countries. He concluded that there is a strong interrelationship between need-achievement and managerial action between those countries.

Hagen²¹ examined the theory of social change, the correlation between sociological, anthropological, psychological and economic variation. He found that the psychological element is the most powerful one in the alteration of a traditional society into a more advanced economic society.

Sociological school

Some studies^{22,23} have been carried out to explain managers' attitudes and behaviour in terms of their different backgrounds concerning social class, ethnic origin, education and age. This type of explanation, however, is to a great extent related to the cultural school⁵.

It can be noticed that there is a great deal of interaction and overlapping between cultural, psychological and sociological dimensions; therefore, Barrett and Bass²⁴ categorized the cross-cultural studies into only three broad groups; these are: universal, economic and cultural cluster.

Cultural school

The basic postulation of the cultural school is that culture is considered an independent variable which has an effect on managerial behaviour and attitudes. Schaupp (Reference 6, p 12) stated the premise of cultural scholars, that is 'international, attitudinal and behavioural differences are the result of divergent values within different cultural spheres'. Nowotny¹⁰ found that the socio-cultural values and tradition, and environmental variables are the main cause of management philosophy differences between North America and Europe. Megginson and Eugene¹¹ concluded from their study of the application of management principles in developing countries, that the principles and functions of management are world-wide, but that methods and management application are dependent upon cultural variables. Therefore, they concluded that

culture is crucial as a determinant of management effectiveness.

Bass²⁵ found that participative management conforms to cultural stereotypes and conditions. Hofstede¹³ reported that organizations are culture-bound. Adler²⁶ said that it is very important to understand the diversity of culture between home and host countries, so that an understanding of management can be achieved. Two models have been represented by Farmer and Richman²⁷ and Negandhi and Estafen²⁸, who investigated the association between environmental factors and management differences. In the first model, Farmer and Richman stated that culture is a major factor in determining both managerial and organizational effectiveness. In the second model, Negandhi and Estafen described the management philosophy as an independent factor. Both models concluded that environmental factors determine management effectiveness.

However, both models were criticized by Schollhammer, who in the case of the Farmer-Richman model (Reference 29, p 86) stated that:

Theoretically, it is possible, and it makes an orderly, logical impression on the reader, to draw up a list of external environmental factors and separate them into black boxes with labels such as cultural-sociological constraints . . . however, empirically it is almost impossible to appraise the precise impact of a given constraint category on internal management practices and management effectiveness. As a basis for empirical research, the ecological orientation of comparative management theory is thus operationally defective. It simply allows too much discretion in the evaluation of external phenomena and their influence on management practices.

Schollhammer (Reference 29, p 88) also strongly criticized the Negandhi-Estafen model stating that:

This theoretical concept can easily be criticized as being not comprehensive enough, as being arbitrary in the selection of the various factors it includes in the model, and also as being superficial in the sense that the focus is simply on overt managerial behaviour as it manifests itself in a few seemingly randomly-selected relationships with internal and external action groups.

CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Having discussed the various schools of thought which interpreted management differences between cultures, it is very difficult to conclude which variable has the most effect on managerial behaviour. Universal cluster scholars believe that managerial behaviour is similar worldwide; economic scholars think that the level of industrialization determines differences and similarities in managerial behaviour across cultures; other scholars presume that psychological and sociological aspects account for managerial differences; and finally, other scholars strongly believe that cultural differences are the major determinant of managerial differences around the world.

In the case of the construction industry, there would appear to be a relatively high level of unawareness of cultural differences on the part of site managers who are active in the Middle East. This is probably due to

the low level or number of training programmes, particularly relating to the issue of managing multicultural work forces in the construction industry². The empirical study revealed that most construction site managers, in the Middle East, did not receive any kind of cross-cultural training, indicating that construction organizations which employ multicultural work forces did not place strong emphasis on cultural training for their site managers.

Moreover, it has been found that the vast majority of construction managers believe that the variations in language and differences in values and attitudes to be found in work forces should make site managers modify or adapt their managerial style according to the type of cultures being met. But, ironically, these managers were found to continue practising their original managerial styles and did not adjust their style to suit those more complex organizations which involved more than one culture². In addition, the effectiveness of site managers was found to decrease when managing multicultural work groups, and the productivity of such work teams naturally also decreased. Indeed, based on this evidence, it can be concluded that culture has an impact on the managerial practice of construction site managers. This would support the cultural cluster scholars.

Suggested training programme

It has been found that most managers involved in the Middle East are ill-prepared to function effectively in a multicultural setting. Multicultural construction organizations are likely to provide adequate information for site managers going on foreign assignments regarding climate, food, drink problems, host country traditions and local law. The missing ingredient, however, seems to be cross-cultural preparation which should be an essential part of training programmes.

Although the briefing which companies provide is extremely important, contractors neglect the nature of the work force likely to be encountered in the Middle East. In other words, when individuals of more than one ethnic background are brought together on a project, the relationship between the team and each of its members becomes the crux of cross-cultural management; in such a complex organization, site managers need special human skills of management and understanding in order to obtain a high level of productivity from such a mix of labour resources.

The authors believe that there is a pressing need for a model to train site managers in managing successfully multicultural work forces so that cultural conflicts can be alleviated. Many scholars have written about the need for training to avoid culture shock, but no one comes close to describing the actual practical points which should be put into practice. The authors, therefore, suggest the following guidelines which should be considered an integral part of cross-cultural training programmes.

Step 1

The first step in such a programme should be general in approach, rather than directed towards a specific culture. In other words, site managers should be given a general idea of cultural differences and similarities across countries. This will provide a manager with a better understanding of the complex role relationships

with which he is likely to be confronted in a cross-cultural situation.

Step 2

It would be desirable for site managers to receive some cultural training regarding the following issues.

Religion (belief): One has to think about the work force's religious pattern in order not to give offence when dealing with them. Although religious practices are not observed by all employees, the practising members of the work force do expect breaks for prayer and fewer working hours during the month of fasting. Most important also, the same treatment is expected by nonobservant employees for equity reasons. Such an attempt will raise the level of morale and increase motivation.

Values and attitudes: Managers should fully be informed about the differences in work forces' values and attitudes in order to develop an open-minded attitude towards the employees and respect them. In particular, each culture has different perceptions and attitudes towards doing things and towards managerial style. Managers, therefore, need to appreciate and understand such differences in order to obtain better productivity.

Tradition: There is a definite need for the appreciation of the trend towards the breaking of traditional barriers between individuals of different cultures. By understanding the customs of the employees and expressing a sincere interest in their tradition, a manager can establish a rapport with his multicultural work force. This would facilitate better communication, hence costs can be cut and productivity can be increased.

Language: This is the greatest barrier confronting construction site managers in the Middle East; it not only hampers daily communication, but can ultimately slow down the work process. In projects performed today in the Middle East, English, Hindi, Urdu, Italian and Greek are in common use. This obstacle becomes all the more critical because of the need for accurate understanding when interpreting and using technical terms. Even if a great number of third-country nationals (e.g. Indian, Pakistani, Sudanese, etc.) can speak English due to the British influence in their countries, the diversity of accents, intonation and degree of fluency can present major obstacles to satisfactory communication.

There are several ways of addressing this problem: firstly, to use bilingual employees, particularly if site managers are under severe time limitation and unable to attend intensive language courses; secondly, by developing the skills of good listeners; thirdly, multinational organizations may consider setting up in-company intensive language courses or sending some of their site managers on external language courses in order to acquire a basic knowledge of the language most likely to be encountered amongst their employees. The practicality of this, however, will depend upon the availability of such managers and the duration of the project and likelihood of future needs.

Sensitivity training: A special sensitivity to the feelings of others is a crucial aspect which site managers should appreciate when managing a multicultural work force. Managers should use their words very carefully when they talk or write to employees from other cultures. To give an example, using bad language when dealing with third-country nationals can raise the tension and affect negatively the relationship between site managers and the work force.

Step 3

Construction site managers should, then, receive accurate information about the type and number of nationalities who are or will be involved in the construction project. The information should include cultural differences and similarities of each group with diverse cultural background with respect to site managers' own cultures and other involved employees. Cross-cultural training should include the highlighting of cultural sensitivity, through the discussion of critical incidents gathered from the experience of site managers who have been in the Middle East and from workers who have been involved in multicultural situations. This kind of training would result in a better leader/member relationship and reduce the stressfulness of the heterocultural situation.

Step 4

Another type of cross-cultural training should be directed towards the employees themselves who come from several cultures. The inherent differences in personalities and needs can lead to conflict between individuals. Therefore, training should give all employees information about the tradition, attitudes, expectations and beliefs of each group involved in the project, so that clashes and misunderstandings between employees can be minimized if not completely avoided.

The work force has a set of expectations as to how they are to be treated by their site managers; the site managers also have another set of expectations. The congruence between the expectations of the work force and site managers is influenced by cultural heterogeneity, or in other words the degree to which separate cultures are similar or dissimilar. The work force should receive a briefing about these differences at the start of the work process. However, with the continuing change-over of site location, this training can only be considered as an ideal to be achieved in few situations.

Figure 1 illustrates the possible association between the training of managers and their effectiveness and the productivity of the work forces. This model suggests that training programmes for construction site managers who manage multicultural work forces are essential to equip them with diverse perceptions of effective managerial style. Such training schemes should provide managers with a better understanding of cultural differences in work forces. Consequently, they will be able to adapt their managerial style to meet new environments, improve effectiveness and hence enhance multicultural work force productivity.

Managerial style for mixed-cultural work forces in the Middle East

If a company is to compete successfully overseas, ideally it should maintain a production team which is

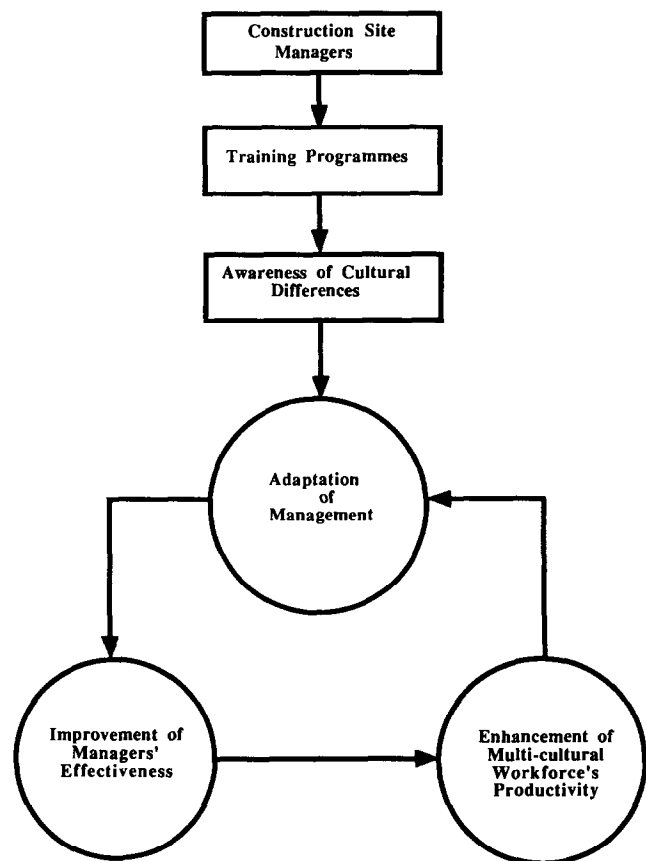


Figure 1. Relationship between training and managers' effectiveness and the productivity of multicultural work forces

able to work to the required technical and human skills required abroad. This, in practical terms, will involve the establishment of a certain team of site managers who have the skills and ability to combine both dimensions of the style, namely task orientation which is concerned with the technical aspects of the job, such as organization, planning, quality control, productivity and project completion; and employee orientation which is concerned with understanding the cultural differences of work groups, having a sincere interest in their cultures, solving their problems, establishing and maintaining a rapport with all individuals on a project. It has been found that the ideal supervising style for the multicultural work force in the Middle East is a combination of both styles, reducing conflicts, misunderstandings and maintaining harmonious personal relationships in the team which will eventually lead to an improvement in the level of the productivity.

Figure 2 shows diagrammatically the relationship between the management style, the managers' effectiveness and productivity. This model highlights the four suggested managerial styles which site managers, in this sample, at present practice in the Middle East. As can be seen from this model, the high task/employee style can lead to an increase in managerial effectiveness and an increase in the productivity of multicultural work forces.

The selection of site managers for overseas projects may have been based solely on performance record in the home country, with little regard to the fact that they

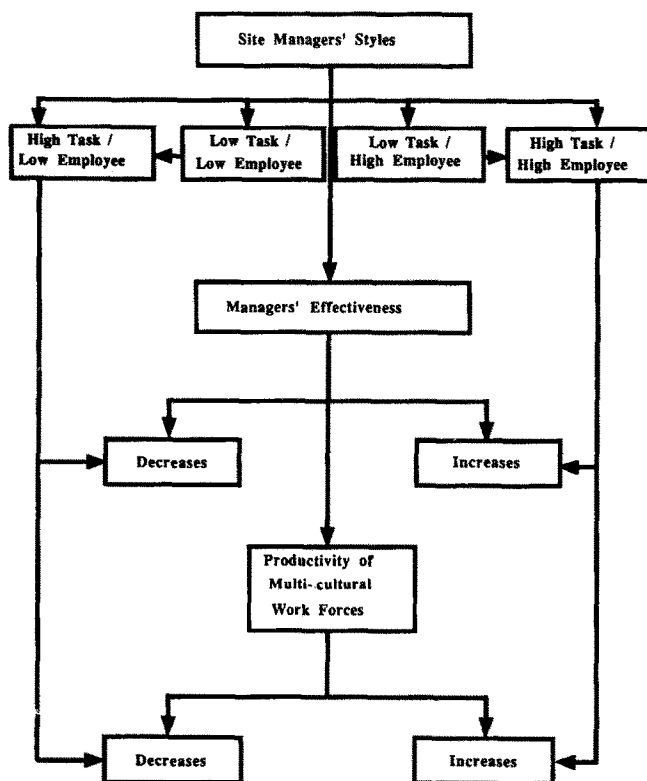


Figure 2. Relationship between managers' style and managers' effectiveness and the productivity of work forces

will be working in a more complex environment requiring a modified managerial style. Moreover, the results show that construction firms have no specific policy regarding managerial practice on the site, as each manager uses his own experience when managing multiethnic work groups without any consideration of the need for adjusting his normal style to the new environment. The results show also that the effectiveness of those managers decreases and hence the productivity of work forces is also decreased.

Therefore, construction organizations need first to identify the style adopted by their managers. Site managers should then receive training in the issue of managerial style, e.g. types of managerial styles and the advantages and disadvantages of each style with reference to one-cultural setting and to cross-cultural situations in order to develop the managers' understanding of this important issue.

Organizations should not assess only each manager's technical ability (e.g. organization, planning and controlling the quality of the work), but also his human skills in terms of his ability to adjust to unfamiliar workers, to get along with them and resolve conflicts, and have respect for other religions and political beliefs. By such assessment, organizations can then identify each manager's relative strengths and weaknesses regarding his managerial practice on the site. After that, firms can give feedback to managers and advise them on the most appropriate course of action, to best fit a site manager to a specific environment.

Therefore, if contractors in the Middle East are to remain realistically competitive in the Middle-Eastern market, in the face of aggressive and fierce competition,

they should consider and adopt a realistic managerial style on a company policy basis.

Labour recruitment in the Middle East

Construction is considered a labour-intensive industry, and therefore a work force is one of the main resources available to any construction firm which should be effectively utilized. Due to the scarcity of local construction workers, culturally homogeneous teams very rarely constitute the work force on Middle East construction projects. The mixed nature of the overall work forces poses a dual set of problems to site managers; therefore construction contractors need to take the issue of work force recruitment seriously into consideration before the start of any project.

In order for a contractor to make a decision on which is the most appropriate work force composition (homogeneous or heterogeneous) that creates fewer problems for managerial staff and which generates greater productivity, the contractor has to study thoroughly the aspects of both categories and weight each advantage and disadvantage as there is no clear-cut answer to this issue. However, the following are suggested.

Recruiting a heterogeneous work force

A culturally heterogeneous work force has both positive and negative impact upon the overall process of a construction project. A culturally diverse group can offer a variety of job specialization with certain technical ability which enhances the level of productivity. Moreover, a contractor could select the construction workers with the lowest wages from one culture rather than workers from another culture with the same level of skill for higher wages.

On the other hand, a heterogeneous work force can induce several problems, such as poor communication, differences in cultural background, and administrative problems, which increase the pressure upon managers and require particular qualities and attention. Having said that, if construction organizations provide their site managers with special cultural training those problems will be minimized if not completely avoided.

Recruiting a homogeneous work force

A culturally homogeneous work force also has advantages and disadvantages in the construction industry. The homogeneity of a work group fosters a greater solidarity and improves interpersonal relationships between team members. The cultural similarities between work team members strengthen the cohesion of the team which can minimize the ambiguity, complexity, confusion and misinterpretation which can be caused by a heterogeneous work force. A homogeneous work force also reduces the administrative problems. These advantages can result in an increase in productivity and the quality of the product. This may, however, affect the degree of specialization which a mixed-cultural work group could have, and a contractor may have little choice but to select construction workers with the lowest wages.

CONCLUSIONS

Construction organizations operating in the Middle East should take the cultural diversity of work forces

into consideration if they are to be successful and competitive. It would be both naive and myopic to simplify the impact of cultural variations of work forces on managerial behaviour, the effectiveness of managers and the level of productivity. Cultural training would maintain harmonious personal relationships between all team members and increase their effectiveness. It should also reduce wastage of valuable and often scarce materials, eliminate misunderstandings and minimize the impact of culture shock.

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