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## Cross-cultural management in multinational project groups

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### Abstract

This paper aims at better understanding the dynamics of international project groups by grasping the strategies project leaders set up to cope with cultural diversity. Three kinds of cross-cultural practices emerged from the comparative study of European project groups: (1) to draw upon individual tolerance and self-control, (2) to enter into a trial-and-error process coupled with relationship development and (3) to capitalize on transnational corporate or professional cultures. An alternative method to enhance the functioning of cross-cultural projects is also suggested. It consists in the construction of cross-cultural patterns based upon a structured examination of the cultural sense-making processes of project members. The paper concludes on the necessarily culture bound approaches of cross-cultural management in transnational project groups.

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Transnational project groups are flourishing in various business contexts. They are temporary structures designed to achieve one goal and which result from the search for horizontal cooperation in organizations. But beyond the general label, horizontal projects correspond to different managerial realities. They appear in different contexts and may aim at several kinds of goals. For instance, some project groups result from various forms of cooperation between companies such as strategic alliances, partnerships, joint-ventures, or consortiums (Hamel, Doz, & Prahalad, 1989). Transnational projects are also encountered within international multidivisional companies to avoid double parallel work in subsidiaries and to make the most of complementary resources. Management by projects appears to be an appropriate way to coordinate activities in organizations torn apart by centrifugal forces (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1992). In many alliances, consortiums and cross-company projects, one main goal is

research and development. Even though they are in competition, firms may be interested in doing research together for several reasons. First, the burden of R&D expenses can be shared among the partners who can launch more ambitious projects. They can also benefit from each other's knowledge and skills. And last but not least, as companies coordinate their endeavors in early stages of technical research and development they are likely to be more effective in creating and imposing to the market new technical standards. MNC also resort more and more to project groups to design and develop new products (Aldridge & Swamidass, 1996). The logic of project management replaces the former mass production system with occasional innovations. Project structures allow greater autonomy than traditional hierarchical pyramids and greater creativity since they rely on multidisciplinary teams. Furthermore, a separate task force is more likely to introduce radical change than a team embedded in organizational routines.

Thus, project groups have multiple forms, stakes and constraints. In some of them, the project is

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physically located in one site and members meet one another on a daily basis while in others, the project team is virtual, their members being dispatched in different units. In some project teams, members share the corporate culture and objectives while other projects gather individuals from different companies. Finally, the pressure towards results varies considerably according to the very nature of the task. For instance, the long-term expectations about new technical orientations and standards in R&D teams exert a lower pressure than the immediate objectives in terms of costs, quality and deadlines in product development teams. However, all project groups involving MNCs have something in common; they make up cross-cultural teams, that is they encompass members with different nationalities. Our study precisely focuses on the dynamics of cross-cultural collaboration in multinational horizontal projects. Indeed, the effectiveness and efficiency of projects are affected by their cross-cultural characteristics.

### **1. How national cultures impact cross-cultural project teams**

For over twenty years, researchers have precisely shown that management practices are embedded in national cultures and that the search for a universal effective way of management is meaningless (Hofstede, 1980; Trompenaars, 1997). People embedded in a given cultural context tend to share certain worldviews (Alderfer & Smith, 1982) including specific representations of appropriate ways of cooperating, managing conflicts, accepting authority, or simply communicating (d'Iribarne, Henry, Segal, Chevrier, & Globokar, 1998; Triandis, 1994). Cross-cultural research has demonstrated that national culture explains between 25 and 50% of variation in attitudes (Gannon, 1994). Whether the variety of worldviews of their members affect positively or negatively the functioning of teams has not been clearly established. The conclusion of empirical researches are mixed (Raghuram & Garud, 1996). On the one hand, it is advocated that the diversity of worldviews increases the available pool of resources that members of cross-cultural teams can bring to bear on complex problems. Thus, they are potentially more creative in problem solving than national homogenous teams (Watson,

Kumar, & Michaelsen, 1993). On the other hand, diversity increases the ambiguity, complexity and confusion in group processes, thus being potentially devastating for the effectiveness of the team. Therefore, no direct relationship can be established between cross-cultural diversity of teams and effectiveness but contextual and intermediate variables should be scrutinized to account for these contrasted results. Some researchers have introduced variables such as the proportional representation of the different groups suggesting that relatively equal proportions are required to benefit from the diversity (Cox, 1993). Others have insisted on the distribution of power among members which influence members' behaviors and therefore the cross-cultural dynamics (Alderfer, 1987). Ely and Thomas (2001) have identified three "perspectives on workforce diversity" that people embrace, each with different implications for a work group's ability to realize the benefits of its cultural diversity. More generally, the impact of national cultures on the functioning of international work team depends on management processes. "Only if well managed can culturally diverse groups hope to achieve their potential productivity" (Adler, 1986: 118).

Our research aims precisely at studying the management processes of cultural diversity in transnational projects. Indeed, to help practitioners faced with this kind of problems, a large literature (Earley & Erez, 1997; Simons, Vazquez, & Harris, 1993; Thiederman, 1991) focus on appropriate behaviors in international work environment. Many authors are concerned with effective global leadership (House, 2000; Simons et al., 1993). However, Segalla, Fischer, and Sandner (2000) argue that most cross-cultural knowledge stems from questionnaires implicitly conveying North American values. It means that skills and traits frequently associated with successful leaders like flexibility, charisma, honesty or self-confidence might not be so useful in a cross-cultural project involving for instance European and Asian members. Besides, most literature about cross-cultural leadership is normative; it is illustrated by a great amount of spicy anecdotes and success stories, but at least to our knowledge, few empirical researches have been made on actual strategies that leaders of multinational teams actually use to manage cross-cultural differences. Our research focuses on how project leaders deal with cultural differences to surmount and even benefit from

the variety of national cultures in their team. We have studied actual practices and related outcomes.

We first present the methodology of our field study. In the second part, we depict three cross-cultural practices that project leaders explicitly or implicitly use to manage their international team. Beside these descriptive findings, we suggest an alternative strategy to enhance the functioning of such projects.

## 2. The research method

To figure out actual practices of management of cultural diversity, we conducted a comparative study of three international project groups. The three projects have in common to gather engineers from several European countries. However, there are very different in terms of contexts, goals and structures. Each case is presented in Exhibit 1.

### *Case 1: A consortium for R&D*

The first project group is a European consortium set up to make R&D in the telecommunication industry. It involves sixteen companies and over fifty persons from eight different countries. These countries are not equally represented since the consortium includes five French, four Swedish and two Norwegian companies and only one company from each following country: Denmark, Italy, Ireland, Netherlands and Portugal. Furthermore, the companies involved do not dedicate the same number of engineers to the project. Eventually, French and Swedish members are the more numerous while Italy or Ireland has each less than four representatives. Excepted for an American and a native of Luxembourg, the project team is composed of people who work in their home country.

The characteristics of the project are largely specified in a contract signed by member companies and the European Union, which finances part of the project. For instance, the contract designates one of the companies as the prime contractor, and this company appoints a project leader among its engineers. However, it is important to note that the project leader has no hierarchical authority over the other partners. Formally, each partner has one vote when time comes to make a decision. The contract also defines the main lines of the organization of

the project such as the executive board and the work units. However, the partners have completed this contract with very formalized rules and procedures that regulate relationships between members. These rules are written in a handbook and define precisely the roles of partner leaders, the format of the documents to be produced, the approval process of these documents by all partners. They even formalize in details appropriate ways of working and behaving. For example, they mention all the steps that a chairperson should go through to conduct an effective meeting: start the meeting on time, give each participant a chance to express his/her view, control irrelevant digression, etc.

Practically, the work is carried out in several geographical sites at the same time. To overcome the problems due to the distance between partners, the handbook plans whole weeks of meeting during which all members come to the same place. Four or five times a year, “*project weeks*” are organized, each partner (at least the largest ones) being in charge for the material organization on its turn. Therefore, these “*weeks*” always take place in different sites (Paris, Stockholm, Toulouse, Madeira, etc.). Between the project weeks, the exchange of information and document management are made mainly through electronic media. Rarely, members resort to phone calls or smaller meetings involving members concerned with a particular technical aspect.

### *Case 2: A project team in electrical engineering*

This project team deals with electrical engineering. It is one of the teams stemming from the management by projects implemented in a German Swiss subsidiary of a large European industrial group which has its headquarter in France. Precisely, the team is in charge for turnkey projects for power distribution in Pakistan. This project includes engineering, supply of equipment, civil works, commissioning, maintenance and after sales services. The team is composed of a project manager, engineers in different fields, a specialist of purchase and a controller. Most of them comes from the different areas of Switzerland (German, French, and Italian parts) or from the French headquarter. But many other nationalities are represented. Several engineers come from the former East Germany, a Belgian, a Malay, a Brazilian, and

a British also joined the company and the team for various personal or professional reasons.

This project group is embedded in the matrix structure of the company; it involves collaboration between different departments. Such projects generally last from three to five years and each team member is involved in several projects at the time. Therefore, the greatest difficulty for the project manager is to make the work required for his own project a priority for team members who are very much in demand. Practically, all team members are located on different floors of the subsidiary building, even if they often have to travel to the site of the future power station.

#### *Case 3: A product development project*

The third project aims at conceiving and developing with pilot customers new products in wireless telecommunications. The project is dispatched among five main European subsidiaries and three other secondary sites of a multinational corporation. Two of the main subsidiaries are located in Germany, one is in France, one in Belgium and the last one in Italy. Several reasons account for this multi-site organization. Firstly the development costs are too heavy to be supported by only one entity. Secondly, the project can benefit from complementary technical know-how spread over the units. And thirdly, the distribution of roles allows two subsidiaries to capitalize on their close relations with pilot customers.

However, the scattered activities of development require sophisticated mechanisms of coordination. The “central group” is in charge for coordinating the development process. It is located in the French subsidiary and encompasses about eighty persons coming from the different sites. The central group is not a registered company; its members are personnel appointed by the subsidiaries. Therefore, some are expatriates, other have local French contracts. Practically, the central group coordinates the specification activities, integrates and tests the technical developments made in various sites and manages the project documentation. The central group is mainly composed of French and German engineers but is in constant interactions with many nationalities in the development centers. Communication within the project is quite dense; it relies on frequent meetings, daily electronic mails and

videoconferences. This project requires advanced coordination to solve quickly a great amount of technical problems and a close follow-up of budgets. Its members experience a strong time pressure because of the cut-throat competition on the telecommunication market.

In each project, one manager has been appointed as the main leader. However, in the Cases 1 and 3, other managers also have the responsibility for leading cross-cultural teams which are subsets of the larger project. In the consortium, the project is split in five work units. Each unit has a leader in charge of managing their team and getting the work done. Like the main project manager, these leaders lack any hierarchical authority over the team members. In the product development team, the central group includes a project director but also three other persons who shoulder the responsibility of leading cross-cultural smaller teams. Therefore, in the study ten people have been considered as project managers dealing with cross-cultural diversity.

### *2.1. Data collection and analysis*

The field work for this research consisted mainly of interviews with the project members and attendance to their meetings as a participant–observer. The methodology for data collection is further detailed in Table 1.

The data analysis was made through two stages: the description of each case and comparative analysis of the three cases (Table 2).

Each monograph was an attempt to account for the actual work processes of the team, the social relationships between members and the structural and historical context of the project team. Once the cases had

Table 1  
Data collection techniques

	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3
Formal interviews	32	25	20
Meeting attendance	Yes	Yes	Yes
Daily presence among the project team	2 “project weeks”	2 1/2 months	No
Informal discussions (lunch and pauses)	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 2  
Descriptive analysis process

Descriptive analysis of each case
1. Making interviews and attending meetings
2. Cutting of transcribed interviews and meeting notes by theme (i.e., cross-cultural decision making, communication processes, perceived effectiveness of the team, etc.)
3. Triangulating information from all interviewees for each theme
4. Writing of a monograph (synthesis for all themes)
5. Validation/correction by interviewees of the descriptive monograph

been validated by team members, the comparison enabled us to point out the salient features of each case, the invariant items and the contextual aspects and to construct sorts of “ideal-types” of cross-cultural management practices and relate them to outcomes on project progresses and members’ feelings.

More precisely, the strategies of cross-cultural management have been identified either because they have been explicitly explained by the leaders themselves or because they have been induced from the analysis of regulation processes within the project teams. For instance, members of all projects explicitly insisted on the role of professional cultures to overcome differences while the trial-and-error processes used to adapt to one another was induced from the longitudinal observation of meetings and decision making in the consortium.

As our research was an exploratory study, we focused on the qualitative description of cross-cultural practices and analysis of their impact on group projects rather than on the accurate quantification of their occurrence in teams. The result of the analysis has eventually been compared with the available literature on cross-cultural management and leadership.

### 3. Findings

The study evidences three kinds of cross-cultural practices implemented by transnational project managers. It is important to mention that these strategies are not exclusive. One given leader often resorts to several practices simultaneously, and within one project, leaders of cross-cultural at various levels often set up different strategies.

#### 3.1. Drawing upon individual tolerance and self-control

In the electrical engineering project, the Swiss manager straightforwardly declared he did not want to make any difference and was careful to manage all team members the same way. Indeed, the simplest way to manage multinational project teams is not to pay any particular attention to cross-cultural differences. Consistently with the findings of Laurent (1998), we observed that when managers encounter cross-cultural differences, they often do nothing and consider that it is legitimate not to talk about them. This attitude is especially overwhelming when the cross-cultural dimension of the projects stems from historical hazards as is the case in the Swiss company rather than from the very construction of the project as in a multinational project designed precisely to make the most of complementary views and competencies. However, equal treatment to all despite differences has also been observed in the other cases.

When nothing is purposefully set up to manage differences, heterogeneous interpretations and practices coexist. For instance, in the R&D consortium, partners from Southern Europe extensively express their opinion while those from Northern Europe and especially Scandinavia only speak up when they disagree with what is being said. These behavioral differences go with the implementation of different parallel technical methods but they do not prevent the project team to pursue its goals, even if as a member said “*it annoys people.*” However, in most projects as in Cases 2 and 3, there is a strong need for integration between members; several solutions cannot be developed at the same time and close coordination is compulsory. Then, compromises on both technical solutions and procedures have to be negotiated.

In both situations—coexistence of practices or compromise negotiation—the lack of institutional management of cross-cultural differences means that the leader explicitly or implicitly relies on tolerance and self-control of team members to surmount difficulties. Indeed, each participant takes upon him/herself to make concessions and enable the team to operate properly. For instance, some German members of the product development project said that they would not put up with other Germans coming to meetings unprepared but they accepted it from their

French colleagues. Despite their irritation, they control themselves to avoid conflicts. More generally, almost all interviewees have stated that cross-cultural teams could not be effective without special personal qualities of their members, namely “*openness*,” “*patience*,” “*self-control*.”

This appeal to tolerance is in line with two opposite discourses: minimizing or praising cultural differences. Part of our interviewees said that in multinational teams, they tended to forget the nationality of their colleague and to focus on technical issues. When talking about cultural differences, they make carefully phrased remarks such as “*they should not be exaggerated*,” “*it’s a matter of persons first*,” etc. Some of them have taken part in many multinational projects and have been so much exposed to cultural diversity that they feel *blasé*. They are used to adapting to various cultural contexts and nationals. Oppositely, the second part of interviewees puts the emphasis on the significance of differences and asserts that they should be respected and turned into advantages. They say that they make their best to struggle against prejudices, stereotypes and ethnocentrism. For them, endeavors to adjust to diversity have their counterpart in what they can learn from their foreign colleagues.

How tolerance and self-control can contribute to project team effectiveness? If culture is considered as a set of worldviews and references that a community uses to make sense of situations, then, it does not command behaviors. A context of interpretation is compatible with a wide range of behaviors. Indeed, within a given cultural community, individuals do not behave all the same in comparable situations and use the “margin of malleability” that goes with every context of interpretation. This malleability of people is what Demorgon (1989) calls “*oscillation*.” It allows cross-cultural learning and makes acculturation possible. It also accounts for the fact that some individuals may feel more comfortable with practices from another culture than their own. For instance, in the consortium, a Portuguese respondent said that she easily adapted to the detailed and definite planning of activities and that she had troubles to adjust to improvisation when she was back home.

However, all required adjustments are not so immediate. Cross-cultural management, which mainly relies on the willingness of participants as in Case 2,

generates frustrations. They can be observed in a number of side conversations or whispers between nationals; these discussions are riddled with negative opinions on others. The small informal groups of nationals that form up at breaks often contribute to release part of the tensions that members experience because of permanent self-control. They often allow potential conflicts to remain latent. Furthermore, continuous adjustments are accepted since members usually do not wish to block the group progresses but are not necessarily well interpreted. For some respondents, they mean giving up more interesting solutions and leveling down.

### 3.2. Trial-and-error processes coupled with personal relationships

The second strategy for coping with cultural differences is to make team members become well acquainted with one another. When they know each other very well, they may empirically set up working arrangements more easily. This strategy is clearly applied by the project manager of the consortium. Social events like dinners organized every project week contribute to develop acquaintance, complicity or even friendship among team members.

Personal relationships enable effective mutual agreements. Participants are not necessarily conscious of the reasons why such or such arrangement is possible because cross-cultural adjustments are not distinct from other adjustments to personalities, genders, regional, professional or corporate cultures which are required in any team, be it national (Sackmann, Phillips, & Goodman, 1999). Frequent communications with other team members make it possible to discover through a trial-and-error process what is acceptable for the partners and what one cannot go against. With time, this method can lead to the development of effective routines even though the contexts of interpretation of others remain obscure.

The limit of this strategy stems from the frailty of empirical adjustments, which do not clear up the eventual matters of conflict. When participants change or when the situation evolves, the pragmatic local arrangements are no longer valid. Compromises based on the willingness of the persons involved in the project do not necessarily make up stable procedures of cooperation. Furthermore, the positive dynamic of



mutual understanding as people get to know each other is not automatic. Oppositely, it may happen as we observed in Case 2 that the frequent interactions reinforce negative stereotypes and polarization between cultural groups. The willingness of participants to solve problems may not be enough to make divergent views and interpretations properly match.

### 3.3. Setting up transnational cultures

If leaders of international project teams cannot draw upon shared national cultures, they may resort to other international cultures such as professional or corporate cultures to federate participants.

In the three studied teams, the engineering culture played a leading role in overcoming cultural barriers as all members shared a common core of knowledge, know-how and representations. Several project leaders and members explained they tried to focus on technical discussions to get away with cultural issues. Indeed, occupational cultures act as catalysts facilitating cross-cultural communication. They provide several conditions favorable to international communication, i.e., a content for exchanges and a common language including technical lexicons and an environment fostering the development of good interpersonal relationships. As one of our respondent of Case 1 pointed: *“the most important is the university course of individuals. If someone made high technical studies in Lille and someone else high technical studies in Stuttgart, they are closer than a French philosopher and a French technician.”*

However, the federating power of occupational cultures should not be overestimated. First, the multiple specialties within a profession introduce differentiation, for instance, different methodological approaches to deal with the same kind of problems. Second, one's occupation may be a deep source of identity, providing social status and social recognition. And, the social identity of engineers is not the same in all the countries (Grelon, 1998; Sorge, 1998). Furthermore, most international projects, as Cases 2 and 3 gather different professions to benefit from their synergy. Therefore, the professional common core is often reduced to the culture of the branch.

When technical preoccupations are not shared across cultural borders, project leaders may try to take advantage of the organizational culture, in the

product development team, the project director tried to promote the norms of the MNC culture. The corporate culture conveys institutional norms of behaviors with which employees, whatever their nationality, are supposed to comply. Instead of mutual arrangements resting on the willingness of individuals, we observe the convergence of the actions of people towards the same institutional references. Corporate culture may contribute to cross-cultural effectiveness since its rituals provide a sense of security which substitutes to the stress stemming from the encounter with unknown “others.” It also provides a shared frame for international work including appropriate behaviors in various situations. These behavioral norms are supposed to replace national habits and to allow pragmatic adjustment.

However, despite the endeavors of the project director and her team, our research showed that the common corporate culture remained in an embryonic state in the team where it was susceptible to play a large role. The subcultures of units had more influence on behaviors than the corporate culture still to be developed. But more importantly, if ever the corporate culture can solve superficial problems by fixing common norms about work hours, appropriate preparation before meetings, appropriate moments to speak up during meetings and so on, it cannot help to cope with cultural conflicts when fundamental cultural interpretations diverge. It is not so easy to set up common norms when they refer to illegitimate practices in one cultural context. The adjustment capabilities of people are limited when required adaptations mean to go against one's conceptions of what is legitimate. The famous Hofstede's research conducted exclusively in the subsidiaries of only one major corporation clearly shows that national cultures do not dissolve even in a strong organizational culture. Lastly, a transnational corporate culture that is compatible with the basic conceptions of all involved cultures can be founded only on a very small common denominator, which considerably reduces the space for action. Such a strategy eventually denies cultural differences rather than makes the most of them.

### 3.4. Ad hoc cross-cultural management

The strategies mentioned above were only partly satisfying to the majority of the leaders but they said

they had to put up with such strategies lacking better solution. As said before, they were resigned to the fact that in cross-cultural teams, members have to be patient, tolerant, etc. To enhance the functioning of cross-cultural projects, we suggest an alternative strategy drawing upon both the analysis of the limits of the three former ones and the literature on cross-cultural cooperation.

The proposed strategy relies on two basic assumptions. The first assumes that the effectiveness of international project teams requires the deep understanding of the contexts of meaning of their members (d'Iribarne, 1996). The second hypothesis is that one cannot expect such an understanding to naturally result from the interactions between team members. In different contexts, frequent cross-cultural cooperation results either in better mutual understanding or in the radical polarization of cultural groups together with a reinforcement of reciprocal negative stereotypes (Brown, 1983). Therefore, we suggest that a kind of cultural mediator helps the cross-cultural team in deciphering each other's system of meaning and constructing acceptable compromises.

Precisely, the suggested strategy consists in joint and patient construction of cross-cultural patterns of action fostered by a structured examination of cultural contexts of interpretation of project members. Practically, the cultural mediator invites participants to regularly think of problematic situations that they have encountered. The inventory of cross-cultural critical incidents is progressively turned into a classification of similar problems. Then, each partner involved is invited to give her/his interpretation of the situation: why did s/he act as s/he did? What was the meaning of her/his move and why s/he thought s/he was doing right. From these explanations, participants and the mediator deduce step by step the interpretation systems that are used by one another. This knowledge is then used to discuss about possible collective practices that would be acceptable for everyone, even if they are legitimate for very different reasons. For instance, in one of the team, French and Swiss engineers both agreed to resort to the project leader to bring discussions to a close when team members could not find themselves an agreement. This solution was effective since asking the chief to solve conflict is legitimate in both cultural contexts. Precisely, for French engineers the decision of the

chief is acceptable because of its formal authority and because s/he is supposed to be skilled and wise enough to overcome the local views of members and to take the global interests of the project into account. For their Swiss counterparts, the decision s/he makes is legitimate as the referee's decision. For them, the procedure to solve the conflict is accepted, therefore, the decision, whatever it might be, is legitimate.

The process of collective construction of local solutions integrates cognitive understanding of others and involvement into actions.

#### 4. Discussion

The strategies to cope with cross-cultural differences are themselves culture bound approaches. For example, to draw upon professional cultures to federate international teams fit the French context of interpretation within which the occupation is part and parcel of personal identity and plays a large role in the regulation of working relations. Indeed, in French corporations, relationships between employees depend on their professional status (d'Iribarne, 1989). Thus, diversity management through the emphasis on occupational culture can be seen as the extrapolation at the international level of a French approach of working relations. Such a strategy may be meaningless with Japanese partners who do not pay so much attention to occupations (Deval, 1993). The last approach, which relies on communication between actors and on unveiling tacit sets of meanings fits the American context, which emphasizes explicit rules. The notion of feedback, praised in American literature to enhance cross-cultural communication shows the widespread belief that making hidden evidences explicit fosters mutual understanding. Making meaning explicit and giving feedback are definitely typical of "low context" cultures like the United States (Hall, 1976). Once again, it is probable that such a strategy will not fit "high context" cultures, which favor implicit communication.

Both the approaches to cope with cultural barriers (individual adjustments, occupational cultures, cultural mediator ...) and the concrete solutions identified (procedures to make decision, to carry out operations or to control the work) are culture bound. Cross-cultural management in international projects is



contingent. Consistently with our relativist assumptions, we cannot hope for a culture free grammar of cross-cultural cooperation. Appropriate patterns of collective action can only be identified through interactions and depend on the context. This does not mean that in the search for pragmatic adjustments project leaders cannot find fruitful sources of inspiration on solutions developed in previous project teams faced with a closely related problematic.

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