

• treat
diversity
as your asset
for
uncommon
gains

by SUSAN LADIKA

photography by CHARLES SHEARN

Ignoring cultural differences between team members can lead to disaster. Instead, tapping into their diversity can help a project thrive.



Sheilina Somani,
Owner, Positively Project
Management, Wembley,
Middlesex, U.K.



When Sheilina Somani, an Indian born in Tanzania, moved to Oxford, U.K., she felt like “a novelty factor, in fact to the point where politicians would tuck us up in bed and people did newspaper articles on ‘look at these foreigners, they live very much like white people do.’”

Her travels around the world as owner of Positively Project Management have given her keen insights into the impact of prejudice. She is quick to stress that prejudice doesn’t just involve a person’s color or culture, but also such characteristics as gender, weight, height, appearance and speech.

Somani, who won the PMI European Palme D’Or for soft skills in 2002, spoke with *PM Network* about the need to recognize prejudice as a project risk factor.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- From the project management perspective, prejudice can be frustrating because it breeds misunderstandings and can stall efficient teamwork.
- A rising proportion of project managers are focusing much more on interpersonal skills.
- The balance of technical skills in a project manager is changing and evolving.
- The project managers who succeed are those who are sensitized to culture and are willing to open up dialogue.

PM Network: What kind of changes has globalization awareness of cross-cultural issues and prejudice?

Somani: A lot of prejudice comes from fear. Because people judge so much on appearance, they don’t actually consider that what they see isn’t what they get.

I’ve seen a lot greater understanding that people are different and we need to move forward. I guess the sadness for me is that I’m still seeing terms like we need to “tolerate” people’s differences rather than things like “learn from” or “embrace.”

I’m doing some work with Deloitte & Touche LLP, who are fantastically investing in program and project management development. I was delighted to see four people of Asiatic origin and an Afro-Caribbean native. We had seven women in the group, and the group was only 27. So that’s exciting in the U.K., in a consulting practice, where

CASE STUDY

COMPANY: Hewlett-Packard (HP), Reading, U.K.

PROJECT TEAM: 11 team members from India, Nigeria, Lebanon and England

PROJECT: Provide server and database support for nearly 250 servers. The work supports two critical applications, which form HP’s warranty, engineer and part scheduler tools.

CONSIDERING CUSTOMS: Because team members come from various cultures, team leader Shelina Allibhai encourages them to celebrate cultural events. In one instance, the team celebrated Diwali, the Hindu festival of light. Indian team members decorated a project member’s home and cooked traditional food.

ROI: Enhanced team environment set standard for others who join the group. Reduces assumptions and judgments made on appearances. Leads to more systemic, holistic approach to dealing with diversity, and ultimately results in better interteam skills and future management skills both in work and social environments.

previously, it was white Anglo-Saxon male in a suit. That says a lot for the firm’s commitment to diversity and not being afraid to be represented, for example, by a female of Asiatic origin or by a gentleman from Gujarat, India, who happens to be Sikh and therefore wears a turban.

PM Network: Because we’ve all got preconceptions about people from other cultures, what happens if you’re heading a project and you don’t try to address these stereotypes?

Somani: It’s a disaster. You’ve basically broken one of the tenets of being a good project manager. You’ve failed to manage your risks. It’s not the tools, it’s the people, and if you’ve missed the point, you shouldn’t be managing the project. If you’ve been naive and you’ve missed the point because you’re new to project management, for goodness sake, get it out and source it out. And that may mean saying, “I think this difference has arisen. We need more clarification.”

PM Network: What benefits does diversity bring to a project?

Somani: It actually allows people to see that there are different ways of coming at a problem. From the project management perspective, that can be frustrating because it means that you’ve got to have the patience for people to explore it through their own roots.

Sometimes you’ve got to be able to facilitate them taking a different perspective. For example, if you’re dealing with a 40-year-old businessman from Germany and you’re trying to elicit some information from him, and he’s thinking it through because he’s looking at a very prescriptive response, what you may have to do is say to him, “Imagine you’re 16 years old and you don’t care about the outcome, you’re just giving an opinion.” And then you free the person to give the response

The first time I met a gentleman from Lithuania, I said, “Goodness, I know nothing about your country. How do you say hello? How do you say goodbye? What sort of schooling system do you have? What sort of foods do you have?”



In one instance, the team celebrated Diwali, the Hindu festival of light. Indian team members decorated a project member’s home and cooked traditional food.

Shelina Allibhai,
Team Leader, Hewlett-Packard (HP),
Reading, U.K.



that's instantaneous rather than the measured, well-thought-out, most-correct answer.

PM Network: In companies that have employees in many countries, how do you deal with different mindsets?

Somani: Standardize tools and techniques, but look locally at what that application meant for that local group. Don't try and impose something that wouldn't be legal in that country, that wouldn't be appropriate for that culture. Recognize that there is a certain level you have to standardize to, but you've got to stay individual to respect that culture.

PM Network: What kind of techniques are managers using to break down prejudice?

Somani: Some of them aren't. I think we have to accept that there are a large bunch of managers who simply say, "It's irrelevant. I've got these people here as resources, and I don't care where they come from."

Happily, there's also a rising proportion of project managers that are focusing much more on interpersonal skills, so the balance of technical skills in a project manager is



To avoid costly conflicts, project managers and team members should be intimately aware of the "seven dimensions of culture."

Fons Trompenaars,
Managing Director, Trompenaars Hampden-Turner,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

changing and evolving, and interpersonal skills and personal management skills are really coming to the fore. Managers who are effective are people who are prepared to be more open.

The first time I met a gentleman from Lithuania, I said, "Goodness, I know nothing about your country. How do you say hello? How do you say goodbye? What sort of schooling system do you have? What sort of foods do you have?" Just being open and very American. I know people often criticize—saying "Americans ask so many questions." I find that wonderfully open, because what they're doing is saying "tell me, show me. I'm interested." I think that's immensely flattering.

When you walk into a new project team, say, "I'm new here. You're the established crew, so if I step on your toes,

tell me. Don't sit there crying in a corner. Talk to me. Because I can't take the pain away or I can't stop stamping on your foot if you don't tell me your foot's in the way."

So being able to have that upfront conversation helps. In some cultures that doesn't work, you have to be more discreet. But the project managers who are succeeding are the people who are sensitized to that, and are either willing to open up and say, "OK, I'm innocent, help me, teach me, or I'm going to keep quiet till I understand this better. I'm going to observe and then I'll ask some questions." **PM**

Susan Ladika is a freelance writer based in Tampa, Fla., and lived in Vienna, Austria, for many years. She has written for such publications as *The Wall Street Journal-Europe* and *The Economist*.

TAKING CUSTOM INTO CONTEXT

Cross-cultural consultant and guru Fons Trompenaars, managing director of Trompenaars Hampden-Turner, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and keynote speaker at PMI Global Congress 2003—Europe, says every culture distinguishes itself via specific solutions to dilemmas within three categories: problems arising from interpersonal relationships, problems due to the passage of time and conflicts relating to the environment. Drilling down, Trompenaars explores what he calls "seven dimensions of culture." To avoid costly conflicts, project managers and team members should be intimately aware of these disparities:

● **Universalism vs. Particularism.** Do rules and procedures or relationships take precedence?

- **Individualism vs. Communitarianism.** Does the individual or the community take priority?
- **Specific vs. Diffuse.** Are relationships maintained for specific purposes and kept separate from other areas of life, or do relationships spill over into many areas of life?
- **Affective vs. Neutral.** Do people reveal or conceal emotions?
- **Achievement vs. Ascription.** Do people gain status from what they've achieved, or by virtue of birth, age, gender or wealth?
- **Sequential vs. Synchronic.** Do people do one thing at a time or juggle several things at once; and are cultures focused on the past, the present or the future?
- **Internal vs. External.** Is nature something to control, or should mankind operate in harmony with nature?