

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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The “Time Problem” in Cross-Cultural Management

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In an age of outsourcing and globalization, leaders are increasingly responsible for managing projects across multiple cultures.

For Americans in particular, this is often a study in frustration. At the heart of this frustration is persistent conflict between cultures over the meaning of time.

African Time

I'm writing this issue while returning from a keynote in Africa. My company has a subsidiary there, and I'm in Kenya and Rwanda every few weeks. One of the phrases that I hear frequently on these trips is "African time."

This is not a reference to a time zone. Instead, it refers to a mindset about time that is somewhat alien to the way that we Americans typically think of time.

For Americans (as for Canadians, Europeans, and a few others), time is a hard reality. It is something that we can slice, dice, and manage. We are endlessly preoccupied with schedules and deadlines.

But this is hardly the case elsewhere on the globe, particularly in Africa, Latin America, most of Asia, and across much of the Middle East. There time is viewed, not so much as a metric to be managed for greater efficiency, but as a conduit for building and strengthening relationships.

Task Versus Relationships

As cultures, North America and northern Europe tend to be task-driven. Most other parts of the world are relationship-driven. This fundamental difference leads to vastly differing beliefs about time.

Americans capture their views of time in such phrases as "wasting time" or "time is money" or "not having enough hours in the day." We are so acculturated to thinking of time this way that it is inconceivable to us that equally intelligent people might reject our concept of time altogether. But they do.

Others are more concerned with the quality of time than the quantity of time. In their minds time flows like a river, and we merely go with the flow, not feverishly checking the

clock to stay on schedule, but experiencing the present moment to its fullest, letting it unfold as it will.

Two Views of Time

In cultural anthropology the American view of time is called "monochronic." The African and Latin American view of time is "polychronic."

In monochronic societies each unit of time is given to one scheduled commitment — and one only. Appointments must start on time and end on time. That's because the surrounding hours have already been promised to other commitments.

Polychronic societies see such devotion to punctuality as enslavement to the clock. How foolish, they say. To them nothing is more important than building and maintaining relationships. And relationships have a rhythm and timetable of their own.

In polychronic cultures, a business meeting may run for an hour or two, when in the U.S. we would have been wrapped it up in 15 minutes. This drawn-out meeting (by our standards) will certainly address the business issue at hand. But in all likelihood, the issue which led to the meeting will not dominate the agenda. Rather, it will merely be one of many topics discussed. And wide-ranging topics at that.

So why such far-flung conversation? Its purpose is not simply to resolve the issue at hand, but to foster a deeper and richer relationship in the process.

Showing Up in Good Time

But if punctuality is no pressing matter in ending a meeting, it's probably no pressing concern in starting one. As a result, in polychronic communities, starting times are very relaxed, very fluid. This lax attitude toward punctuality is one of the greatest frustrations for Americans working in a polychronic setting.

In America, if you show up 30 minutes late for an appointment, you are not surprised when the other party is aggravated, if not offended. In a polychronic society no such offense is taken. The prevailing assumption is that you must be late because some pressing matter came up in another relationship. You will be here "in good time," as my friends in Africa are fond of saying.

Besides, in polychronic cultures setting the time for meeting is rarely viewed as an exercise in precision. In parts of Africa, "I'll see you at nine a.m." is best understood as meaning "I'll see you sometime before noon."

This style of thinking is as foreign to Americans as our preoccupation with the clock is to people who are polychronic. To us a casual attitude toward punctuality is a sign of laziness, ineptitude, lack of self-discipline, or personal disrespect.

Therefore, when we are managing cross-cultural projects that put us in polychronic settings, there is constant struggle over the best use of time. And polychronic types are as frustrated with us as we are with them.

Bridging the Differences

So let me offer some thoughts that have been helpful to me in bringing together monocronic and polychronic teams.

First, **both views of time are equally valid**. One is not right, the other wrong. Neither is one better than the other.

Compared to their polychronic counterparts, monochronic cultures tend to produce higher standards of living, greater personal choices, and broader overall prosperity. But at a price. People who are polychronic would point to the horrendous divorce rate in the U.S., the weak family fabric, and the feeble sense of community as evidence that we have sacrificed relationships on the altar of efficiency and achievement. There is clearly merit to this critique.

On the other hand, if polychronic cultures are to compete successfully in a global economy, they must adapt certain traits of the monochronic outlook. Global logistics and just-in-time delivery systems are clock and calendar driven. That reality is inescapable.

As a result, **we both have something to learn from one another**. Rather than pitting one view of time against the other, we need to borrow the best from both perspectives.

To do so, **we must recognize that our views about time are a belief, not a reality**. Citizens of any culture take in its prevailing beliefs so deeply and so uncritically that these beliefs seem like facts. But they are not. They are beliefs rooted in cultural conditioning. And this is especially true when it comes to how cultures perceive time.

Once we recognize this truth, we are then freer to acknowledge the value of other views of time, respect these views, and borrow from their wisdom. In the process we gain more patience in cross-cultural settings where our own view of time is not the norm. And with that patience, we remove a distracting frustration from our management of cross-cultural responsibilities.

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