

A black banner for the Project Management Practitioners' Conference 2018. In the top left corner is the PMI Bangalore India Chapter logo. In the top right corner is a circular logo with a globe and the text 'PMPC 2018'. The center of the banner features a photograph of the NIMHANS Convention Centre in Bengaluru at night, illuminated with warm lights. Below the photo, the text 'Project Management Practitioners' Conference 2018' is written in a yellow, sans-serif font. Underneath that, 'ARCHITECTING PROJECT MANAGEMENT for Value Creation' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom, the dates 'July 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018' and the location 'NIMHANS CONVENTION CENTRE, BENGALURU' are written in a yellow, sans-serif font.

## **Across Geographies – From the lens of a project manager from a healthcare CRO business**

Global Reach

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## ABSTRACT

I am writing about a little different path here – it's not my team that's diversified but my clients.

The highest external challenge for a project manager in a CRO space is the successful project delivery to the clients residing oceans away! Not just the time zones but multiple factors like cultural differences, business model, country rules and regulations etc. keep playing the snakes in the snake and ladder game of project management.

Immaterial of the complexity of the project and business vertical, a religious practice of the basics would help the project manager in running the show without much a chaos.

Key elements:

1. Homework on culture and country – a little bit of dedicated research
2. Rapport and gaining confidence – talk and walk their project language
3. Technical expertise – our brains are for you
4. Articulation of project progress – I am still supplying you a cow which would yield less milk but not a bull for sure

Being aware of riding a ship in the rough sea, the sailing skill of a project manager plays a vital role in not just the safe arrival at the destination but also on future travel opportunities.

## INTRODUCTION

CROs (Contract Research Organizations) are purely service oriented business models that seldom produces any product but takes up business/services for product based companies. Thus, every CRO is dealing with multiple clients' day in and out which demands them to be more versatile and dynamic; as well as making them prone to challenges, which if not dealt with the right spirit and intelligence are capable of pulling the business into a vulnerability to the power of snakes in the snake and ladder game.

Role of a project manager in this type of business is like a bike that should run on 25% fuel and 75% air yet expected to give the highest mileage immaterial of the nature of the road! The situation is much more interesting in case of healthcare industries, wherein project management per se is not still fully accepted. Ground reality is that the project manager in a CRO healthcare space will have to walk, drive, fly and sail a "bike" without having the steering control!

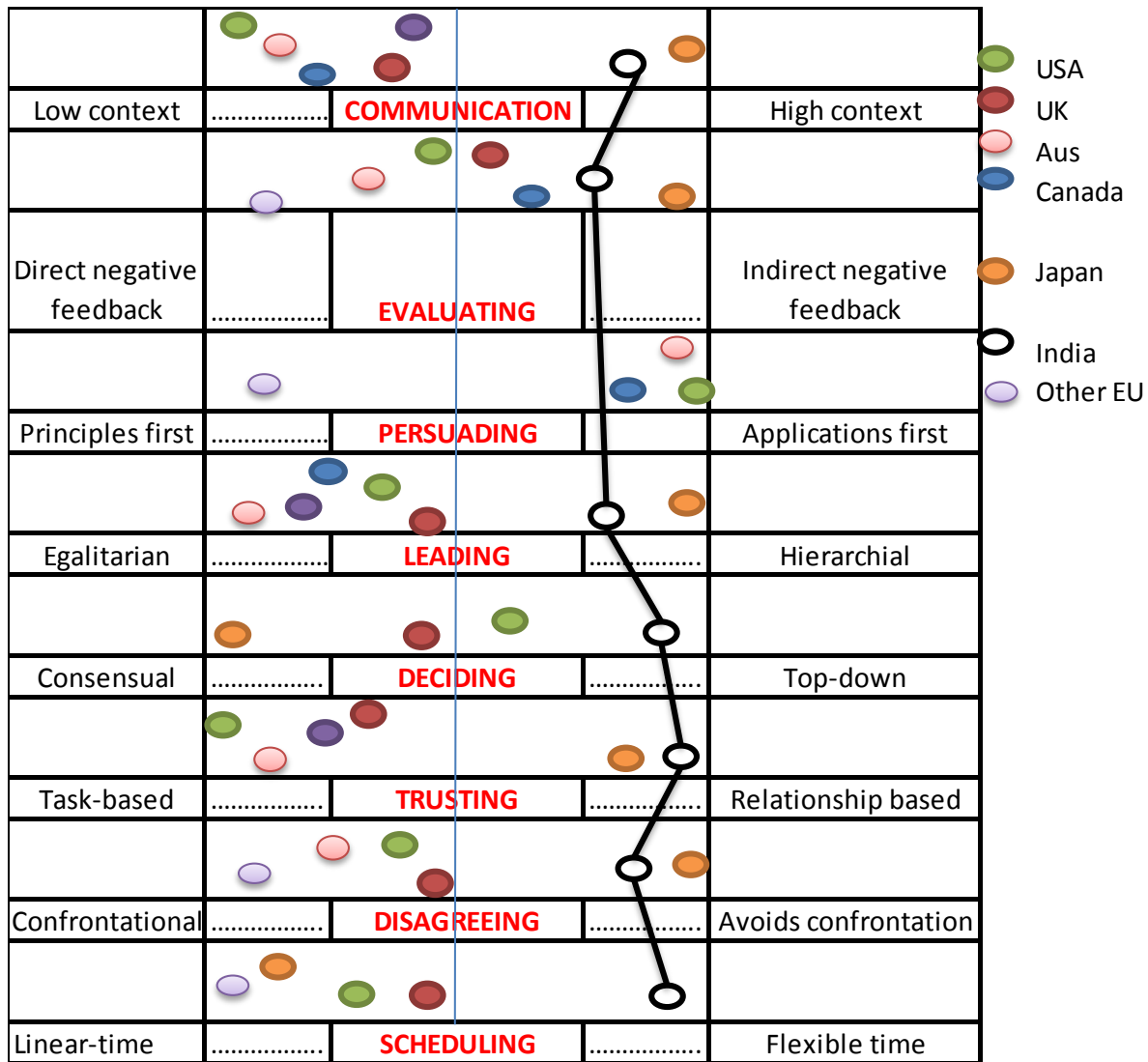
Unity in diversity is very much applicable to us as we deal with people across geographies. Internal challenges starts looking timid while working with clients spread across the globe, around whom our businesses revolve. Although the organizational structure has a lot of powerful chairs, it is an unwritten rule that the project manager must share a peg in the party. As much as this might sound unpleasant, in a way showers us a lot of empowerment, ownership and builds in leadership attitude.

Juggling with geographies from a single location is like the current Bangalore's weather which shows up all four seasons in a same day. Howsoever one thinks he/she is prepared, there still are surprises showing up which cannot be dealt with any thumb rule. Based on my experience, I have come to a conclusion that instead of handling the surprises when it comes, there are two better mechanisms that could make our lives simpler viz. 1. Anticipating the challenges and 2. Setting up the foundation so well so that the surprises never goes out of control to impact the business.

Technology has gone crazy today to the extent of Google assistant capable of fixing up our salon appointment. Having said that, not all of that could be replaced by machines/computer that no human interference is needed. In short, Project Management is a direct proportionate to People Management, and more of a natural intelligence is what is the need of the hour. As we get busy in our work schedule day by day, we tend to rely mostly on tools/software for delivery and many a times forget/miss the fact that the people associated with it are the ones to be taken care for our product/project/business to be successful.

## DETAILS OF THE PAPER

The three C's: Cultural map – Customer centricity and Communication



The key elements that are discussed in this paper are dependent in nature, and a shortfall of even one of it wouldn't be yielding the desired result as efficiently as anticipated. Having said this, communication is the mother of all which should be rooted deep into our subconscious mind.

### **Homework on culture and country – a little bit of dedicated research**

Being an Indian is a thing to be proud about. Perhaps, due to our adjustability and adaptability we have become one of the outsourcing hub today and this one thing demands us to know more of the people we work with. Cultural practices are inherent in nature and irrespective of our work place/country, one tends to show up his/her originality of culture. However, for work sake we all have to adapt ourselves to fit into the country that we stay put for work. This gets far the more challenging when one has to serve people from diversified culture.

Project managers are considered to be one of the key component as well as neutral entities in every organization. Especially in a CRO space where customer centricity grabs utmost importance, a considerable amount of business's success is connected with the ability of the project management team. The role of a project manager gets critical at two instances viz. 1. Setting up the project atmosphere at the time of initiation and 2. Management during crisis. These demands a project manager to be well aware of the cultural differences of the people that we are dealing with, and the cultural map is more like a bible to us. Not only this, it becomes our responsibility to educate our internal team on these lines as collective efforts yield better results, and we project managers are more dependent on the rest of our internal teams for project delivery,

### **Rapport and gaining confidence – talk and walk their project language**

For someone who is sitting miles away and having invested several million dollars in us, every second is a question whether they will be able to realize their dream project through us. Businesses do not happen with anonymous people or overnight but only through persistent effort and rapport that is built over the period. Although many other stakeholders contribute in bringing in business, project manager holds one of the key accountability to keep the wheels spinning seamlessly.

### **Technical expertise – our brains are for you:**

Technical expertise is one of the selling tool in any CRO business, and an important channel for building rapport and thus the customer retention. As there are several players in the market who would afford similar services at a cheaper price, clients are always watchful of emerging sources to run their projects. However, how well we showcase our technical expertise stating our edge over the others is the entry ticket to win the project/business.

As the business model of CRO per se is to work for the clients, there are cases wherein the customers use the service organization to just carry out their instructions and run the studies. Other cases are such that they totally rely on our expertise on that particular project. The third variety is that both the parties come together mutually to deliver the project. Every case has its own challenges, and the project manager has to be highly adaptable to this changing needs to take the project forward.

**Articulation of project progress – “I am still supplying you a cow which would yield less milk but not a bull for sure”**

In a business environment, the top two people requiring effective articulation skills are the business development and the project managers; the latter is a step above the business guys for the very fact that they have to run a successful show immaterial of the ways the business was brought in and the commitments that was given during the time of signing of contract. Gone are the days when this particular skill was seen as a negative trait - concealment of the truth. In the current world, howsoever a project manager trains himself/herself on the soft skills, there is a continuous demand for improvement.

Normally, the science speaking community lack this very important skill and thus end up putting up a sorry face to the client only for the fact of not being able to convey the message across in a language/tone/vocabulary that is understood by the receiver. This doesn't mandate a multi-lingual proficiency but nuances of “conveying the right message at the right time to the right audience in the right tone”. Articulation in itself is a collection of other skills like boldness, analytical ability, emotional intelligence to name a few.

Listed here are the common challenges and methodology that we have been facing and practising:

**Key challenges:**

- Gaining the trust
- Customer retention
- Effectiveness in our communication to convey the right message across – emails, face to face and telephonic
- Interpretation of feedback/comments from clients
- Agreements and disagreements; for example - persuading the clients to agree to our disagreement(s) on changes in goal posting, scope creep etc.
- Ability to grab the hidden/unsaid messages and/or clues

**Methodology:**

- Adherence to business ethics
- Commitment to the timelines and quick turnaround time – not only the project delivery but also on smaller things like response to emails, phone calls, shipments etc. (crucial for a pilot/evaluation project)
- Keeping the dialogues going on regular intervals irrespective of the project status
- Transparency in communication – good or bad
- Attention to detail
- Proactive forecasting and alerts expressing our interest in running their project(s)

- Not just being business oriented but orchestrating with them on their goals (need not necessarily like or agree with the customers in totality but to be with them to achieve their project vision)
- Alertness in understanding
- Internal stakeholder management – who speaks what and when, to the client
- Setting up a comfortable environment for the customer to work with us from a distance
- Application of general lessons learnt from one client to overall operations
- Educating the client on the organizational systems and practices, and also that of our country

#### **Case studies:**

#1. As most of us know of how finicky is our Indian customs, one of our US based clients were expressing their unhappiness on the transit time of packages from their end to our organization. This was further fueled by the online status from the courier service provider that these several incidents went up to their escalating to our top management of the delays caused to their downstream activities.

#### **Challenges:**

1. Customer losing the trust and reliability on us
2. Tackling their unrealistic expectations on transit timelines
3. Managing the noises from our internal stakeholders

#### **Methodology used:**

1. Multiple rounds of detailing of the way our Indian customs operate and the challenges faced by organizations like us
2. Micro level tracking of the events to make our client believe in us and build back the trust
3. A day to day update to them on the status and reasoning out

#### **Lessons learnt:**

This provided us with an opportunity to thoroughly study the operational style and requirements of our Indian customs and the proactive measure that one could take to meet their requirements for any incoming shipments so that the customs do a lesser scrutiny of the packages for clearance, which would actually save a lot of time.

#### **Benefits to the business:**

1. Customer was retained and in fact are now ready to listen to us on everything that we suggest to them on the matter
2. A new process was set up and being practiced till date which otherwise wouldn't have materialized so quickly



**#2.** Indians are proud of our speaking and understanding ability of English in spite of being a non-native language. The situation that we dealt was with one of our European customer who was overall happy with our deliveries but made a rather mild comment which was misinterpreted to be an acidic feedback on our abilities. “Shameful on you and shameful of us” – certainly not the same if read rightly.

**Challenges:**

1. Understanding the real message behind the word “Shame” – right interpretation of negative feedback
2. Convincing the client and internal team across

**Methodology used:**

1. Took ownership to handle the situation as during troublesome situations mostly the project manager is looked up to manage it
2. Evaluated all the possible meaning and reasons behind the feedback
3. Set-up a telephonic call with the client to understand and address

**Lessons learnt:**

1. Clients also make mistakes and mis-read our sensible messages; and CROs need not be submissive but be bold to take it up with them
2. To be more thoughtful while answering the client – not always explanatory or crispy but in a way to make them accept what we say

**Benefits to the business:**

1. A bad remark on us was clarified and turned into a good one
2. Rapport level improved

**#3.** Technical expertise when exhibited at the right time and at the right level will only yield good results, if not and / or overdone can even lead to loss of business. People across the globe have different level of sensitivities that in spite of doing a great job but only asking them to analyse the data themselves once for a double confirmation might offend them to the extent of calling off the business,

**Challenges:**

1. Correct the bad impression – a typo that was one done on one of our data sets had left an everlasting remark with our client that they started looking at our data with doubtful eyes only
2. Customer retention amidst a high level technical team managing the project
3. Address the probable financial loss

**Methodology used:**

1. Continuously attempted to connect to them over phone calls instead of emails so that the data interpretation would be done live and discussed for any clarification
2. Regular feedback calls were organized on our progress
3. Internal escalation was done and project leaders were changed to give confidence to the client

**Lessons learnt:**

1. Technical skills over used or with the wrong phrases can turn to be disastrous
2. So much being submissive to the clients might not guarantee a good business relationship
3. Failure to read behind the lines has the potential to a bad impact

**Benefits for the business:**

This is a typical negative case wherein because of our inability to understand the client needs, read their tone, and also by overdoing with a thought of satisfying them had in fact made us to lose them once for all.

## CONCLUSION

With the advancement in technology, we are tuning our lives to be more digital and losing out on psychological basics. Howsoever the computers and machines take over our day to day activities, ultimately we are to deal with a bunch of human beings to realise our dreams and goals irrespective of an individual or organisation. This particular matter is of utmost importance for a project manager who is dealing with varieties of people routinely in order to deliver the business that his/her organisation has committed to, and this is such a vulnerable role that one gets exposed to a greater extent yet is expected to be flexible, adaptable and focused on delivery.

A change in one amino acid in our DNA sequence makes an entirely different human with a different sets of characteristics and handling those differences sitting miles away and turning every difference into a positive outcome is an unmatched skill. And the foundation for this is always going to be “**customer centricity and communication**”.

Howsoever complex the task may look, when the basics are taken care rightly the probability of success is certainly high. Understanding the differences, gaining the trust, applying the knowledge and passing the right message at the right time to the right audience in the right tone has the capability to take through a long successful journey for a project manager.

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