Cultural Awareness: Tailoring Your Presentation to the Audience

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It is generally accepted that communication is 90% of a Project Manager's job.

As we have covered in an earlier article (Managing a Virtual Team), the basic theory of communication involves a sender, a receiver, a message and a medium. Another article that we published focused on "the challenges of virtual communication," and explained how the inability to see body language and its relationship to a person's vocal tone, facial expressions and hand gestures make it very difficult to judge the effectiveness of communication. This is especially noticeable when cultural and generational differences are factored into the equation.

There exists a great deal of high quality material about delivering effective presentations, and this is not the purpose of this article. This article focuses on face to face communication, particularly the subtleties in play when, as a Project Manager, you must to present to a number of people – be it a large group of stakeholders for your project, or perhaps a general audience. Your presentation may involve providing information about your project as a case study or discussing the project management methodologies you use.

Consider the following scenarios:

- You are an English project manager of a large construction project in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and you have been asked to make a presentation to a residents' committee comprised of people who live in the district surrounding your project.

- You are a South African project manager of your company's new IT system, currently being rolled out globally, and you need to present it to the arm of the business in Sydney, Australia.

- You are a Brazilian project manager, and have been invited to a project management seminar in Paris, France to discuss a successful project that you managed.

One of the things to think about when preparing a presentation to a large group is: what is their cultural background, and what must I do to make my presentation effective for them?

As you prepare for your presentation, here are a few examples of cultural differences to consider::

- In some cultures, you can expect many questions from the audience. In others, people may prefer to approach you on an individual basis following the presentation – prepare your presentation accordingly, e.g., whether or not to solicit questions. Is there a particular structure that will work best for your audience, and is there anyone who can advise you in this area?

- How should your presentation be formatted to be most effective for your audience ---- Power Point slides, discussion with notes provided? Certainly, you need to cover the pertinent

facts about your project, but are there formats that will have a greater impact on your audience than others?

As you are preparing, take a moment to find out about the local culture in which you will be presenting, either from colleagues you know from that culture or through other means. Online resources are readily available that can provide insight into everything from the economic climate of a country to the communication styles of a culture. Taking the time to adequately prepare can make a big difference to the effectiveness of your message..

In conclusion, when you must make a presentation to people that you do not know, think about your audience's cultural background, and select a suitable presentation style. It will help you both deliver an effective presentation and obtain valuable feedback.