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next level consulting News

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Establishing professional Project Management within Asia and dealing with cultural differences

Interview with Walter Sedlacek



next level: Mr Sedlacek, where did the idea of conducting a PMO workshop in Bangkok come from? How come the PMI Chapter Thailand invited you?

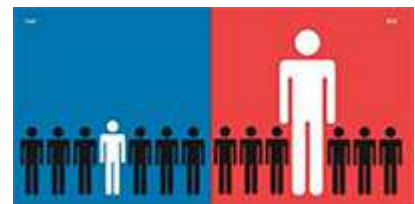
Walter Sedlacek: In April 2014, I was already working in Singapore for over a year. I was heading a regional data-centre of a large international IT company. We had customers all over Asia and I got in touch with the PMI Chapter Thailand. The president, Petros Rigas,

asked me to give a talk to the PM community in Thailand. It was well received and subsequently I was asked to run a two-day workshop in March 2015.

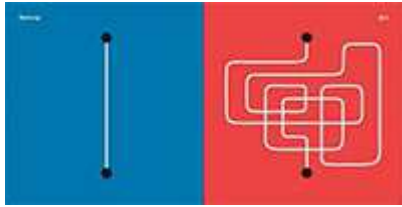
next level: What cultural difference did you detect between Asia and Europe, especially in project work and setting up PMOs?

Walter Sedlacek: Asian culture is really different. Here are some examples to demonstrate this:

- A manager in Asia receives a lot of respect. Things like Matrix organization barely exist. A manager is expected to have the final say in all decisions, to always have answers for the team and to be an expert in all matters. (The picture “The boss in Asia in comparison with the boss in Europe” is a good illustration of this phenomenon).



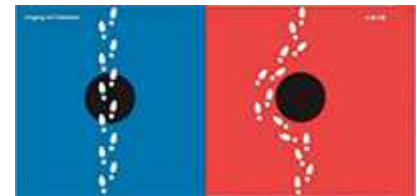
One can easily imagine that it is quite a challenge to teach how to build a temporary organization with temporary communication and decision-making structures - as is required in every project. Empowering the project manager is even more key than in Europe. This became very clear during my workshop.



- Communication in Asia is always indirect and it works through insinuations and implications. A “Yes” can imply “Yes, I agree”, but it can also simply mean “Yes, I am listening to you”. Pinpointing the real meaning is a challenge. For example if you were explain as a Project manager to your sponsor that there is a delay in the milestone of your project, the sponsor

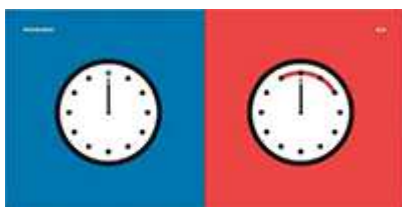
might say “Yes”. This could mean two different things: “Yes, of course I accept the delay” or “Yes I understand that you are late again”. (For further illustration, refer to the picture “Communication in Asia in comparison to communication in Europe”). To solve this or to better deal with this I placed a focus on communication skills. Successful communication must include different angles and perspectives and often it is an iterative process using a lot of paraphrasing and questions.

- As a consequence of the two points above the mention of problem is generally avoided in Asia. Asians generate a lot of creativity when they need to circumvent a problem, which they mostly do. (The illustration “Dealing with problem in Asia and Europe” demonstrates this). In my workshop, I provided customized templates for status reports, which required a very



detailed description of a potential problem. This helped to get the problem into clearer focus and finally to accept it as a reality with an impact on future tasks.

- Last but not least: Timing. In Western society it is impolite to be late. At least people feel some kind of guilt when they are late. In Asia time is dealt with in a non-linear fashion – tasks are dealt with according to their priority or according to the hierarchical rank of the task giver. Adhering to a schedule is not such a strict rule as it is in the Western world. A strict schedule is not seen as necessary and can be experienced as too rigid, not allowing for enough flexibility to deal with situations or topics as they arise. Distractions and interruptions are accepted and are dealt with according to the rank of the person interrupting. When an important person calls during a meeting, it is okay to answer the phone.



Asians also love efficiency but that doesn’t mean they will bring slides and presentation to a meeting. Again they like to allow for flexibility and time for discussions. (Please refer to the picture “Dealing with time in Asia and Europe”). The solution here is simple. When planning a meeting or workshop build in as many time buffers as possible and then add some more. When

communicating breaks announce a 15 min break but allow for 30 minutes. In my office in Singapore I hung the picture “Dealing with time in Asia and Europe” on the wall behind my desk. However, people tended to ignore it and continued to follow their habitual Patterns.

next level: How did you structure the workshop to meet the expectation of participants in Asia?

Walter Sedlacek: I explained everything from different angles and let participants work out the solutions to problems for themselves. At the beginning I outlined only briefly what a PMO is and then formed little groups to discuss their pain-points and success stories with PMOs. Then I added more details about PMOs and the groups discussed the structures of PMOs and its roles and responsibilities in more detail.

At the end I outlined the entire process of forming a PMO. The participants then chose a live case of a company establishing a PMO. They developed a work-breakdown-structure (WBS) for this project. This WBS was discussed and adjusted to ensure success. In a role-play the Head of PMO then defended his project against a board member. The role-play was analysed in detail.

About Walter Sedlacek

The 47-year-old, a Physics and IT graduate with an American MBA, has a rich experience in implementing PMOs. Very often he was involved with projects from their conception to their successful delivery with a healthy ROI. Walter has more than 10 years' experience in project management. He lived and worked in Singapore, Detroit and London supervising a broad range of international IT projects. Most recently he worked in the Cyber Security environment.

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