How can international development leaders and project managers build and sustain trust within and across their teams? Photo by: Terry Johnston /CC BY

Cross-cultural collaboration. Why is it so hard? As international development practitioners, we are typically working toward the same well-intentioned goal. If our interests are aligned, then why isn’t it easier?

Well, many reasons: funding, deadlines, limited or misdirected resources, language differences … the list goes on.

But since we can all agree that effective cross-cultural collaboration is mandatory for implementing any successful international development project, than we owe it to ourselves to assess the obstacles to collaboration and identify strategies to facilitate it.

Based on my experience as a cross-cultural communication trainer, I often argue that trust is the most fundamental and critical factor in all productive collaboration and high team performance. And without a foundation of trust, development projects often fail to meet objectives and produce results.

The link between collaboration and trust is apparent: Effective collaboration requires
functioning relationships among parties, and relationships thrive when there is trust among those parties. But building and sustaining trust within international development project teams is tough work that requires almost constant attention and nurturing.

As a development leader — whether you are working at headquarters or in the field — the culture of your organization or team is your responsibility. Building a culture that will lead to project success is also an opportunity. I recommend investing the necessary energy to build a culture of trust that will facilitate constructive collaboration and help you accomplish your development objectives. Here is some basic guidance to do just that.

Understand socio-cultural norms

While trust is an important element for any team, the stakes are higher in our field of international development because we are challenged to adapt to unfamiliar places, people and cultures. Adjusting always takes time, but development project managers can get a head start by researching the socio-cultural norms embedded in their operating environment before they hit the ground and during the early days of the project. If you do nothing else before starting work in a new country, pick up the phone and call someone who knows the country, the local customs and context.

Some questions I ask about a country or culture before starting work:

- What is the security and political climate?
- Is there a history of colonialism that might influence interpersonal dynamics?
- What projects have recently succeeded or failed here and how can we learn from them?

Some questions I ask about any cross-cultural team:

- Are team members accustomed to working across cultures?
- Is this a face-saving culture? Is this a clan-oriented society?
- Are there any language differences or socio-economic class considerations among the team?

Socio-cultural generalizations are not always accurate, but they can help project managers navigate new territory. For instance, the United States and Western Europe tend to be individualistic and future-oriented. Most Americans and Europeans aim to define the future on their own terms, even if it means talking straight and ruffling a few feathers. From the onset, trust is built through clear and frank communication. On the other hand, in many Latin American, African and Asian cultures, group harmony is paramount and discretion regarding when and how to express disagreement is a valued skill in sustaining trust relations. These cultures often give more thoughtful consideration to history than a future-oriented culture, which is comfortable breaking free of the past.
Even with the most basic understanding of socio-cultural norms, the project manager is better positioned to identify potential cross-cultural issues and mitigate them.

**Appreciate the logic behind different approaches to trust**

People build trust relations in different ways, but I have observed two main “types” of professionals that I call (1) Foundation types and (2) Tool types.

For Foundation types, casual interaction and small talk play a pivotal role in trust-building. The Foundation type assesses the potential relationship through an informal mapping of a team member’s character. A Foundation type will spend considerable time gathering background on other people like learning about someone’s family, homeland, hobbies, likes and dislikes. Through this interaction, they are learning about the person’s values and demeanor while comparing it to their own. Foundation types are all about relationships. When a new project commences, nothing could be more valuable than grabbing coffee or beer, playing golf, or taking a long walk with a team member.

The Tool type is less emotional in his or her approach to trust-building. Tool types care more about another person’s practical strengths and weaknesses and are interested in uncovering what he or she brings to the relationship. While there may be some small talk in the beginning of the relationship, Tool types get right to business and are far more interested in observing your professional proclivities to assess your creditability. Personal details are more of a distraction than a benefit to building trust. For Tool types, “time is money” and getting the job done is the optimum way to build and sustain trust. If you have worked across cultures before, perhaps you can recognize different cultural groups that fit roughly into these two categories.

I encountered an interesting interplay of Foundation and Tool types during a large Japanese-funded project on the Indonesian island of Java, which was facing difficulty getting off the ground. The Japanese, notorious for their formality, kicked off the project with a series of highly structured and methodical meetings that were proving unproductive. They reported that their Indonesian partners were resisting early plans and did not offer alternatives. The Japanese felt they were lacking motivation and found that, despite multiple efforts, the collaboration was not gaining traction. A consultant who spoke with the Indonesians reported that the local team felt uncomfortable with the Japanese approach and wary of the Japanese, as there had been no effort to cultivate relationships and trust in a way that felt familiar. Without trust, the project had little chance of succeeding. At the urging of the consultant, the team began to meet in more informal settings where there was less pressure to discuss business and more opportunity for casual conversation. This adaptive approach helped reconcile “type” differences, build requisite trust and salvage the project.

Get development's most important headlines in your inbox every day.
Schedule time for relationship building

Everyone carries a set of expectations regarding how relationships should form and function. When those expectations are violated, we often mistakenly assess behaviors as character deficits rather than cultural differences. Social psychologists note this is a common error people make when evaluating other people’s character, and this is exponentially exaggerated working across cultures.

Unfortunately, development workers typically operate under tight timelines so we rarely have sufficient time to invest in relationship building. Yet, as the Japanese in Java scenario reveals, the effort to push an agenda without first building relationships can result in project failure and this is particularly true when Tool types are working in Foundation cultures.

I recommend that project managers literally write a relationship or team-building stage in your project plan and schedule appropriate time to connect with your team, even under the tightest project requirements, schedules and budgets. The relationship-building cycle can start with informal meetings and casual lunches so team members get to know one another. You can then gradually move to facilitated brainstorming sessions about the project so team members can share ideas, perspectives and experiences. This steppingstone approach will help team members feel comfortable around one another and build an environment where all opinions and perspectives are respected and valued.

Prioritize effective communication

Any project manager will tell you that effective communication is critical for team performance and can make or break a development project. For me, “effective” communication is communication that creates and fosters shared understanding.

Most critically, there should be a shared understanding of the project goals, team mission, and individual roles and responsibilities.

Immediately upon arrival, schedule time to map out professional expectations with each member of the team. To avoid any misunderstanding, be clear about what you require from each of them and be prepared to communicate your rationale for certain expectations. Encourage each team member to voice out their concerns as well, especially if any of your expectations clash with local norms.

Further, you need to establish a system for managers to offer continual feedback. You may need to get creative, as direct feedback may be perceived as rude and threatening in some cultures.
Beyond creating communication systems, your relationships will benefit if you are willing to experiment with adjusting your communication style. If you are more of a Tool type working in a Foundation culture, you may need to adjust your communication style in order to accomplish your goals efficiently. For instance, sharing personal or life experiences may help team members be more comfortable to share their opinions. Others might prefer to express opinions in the form of a suggestion.

Monitor team dynamics and adjust your tactics often

Finding a way to foster positive team dynamics and build trust cross-culturally is a highly creative process. As you move across borders, you will find there is no “right” way to build trust, yet there are ways that are more or less appropriate in different contexts.

Flexibility is a core competency of being an effective cross-cultural manager. Team dynamics are constantly in flux, depending on who is present, the general health and energy of the team, and the location of the project. I recommend you monitor the level of trust within a team by checking in with team members on a regular basis. How you respond to what they feel about team dynamics requires a degree of flexibility as well.

As you start to monitor the team dynamics more closely and methodologically, you will uncover that creating a culture of trust is a moving target. But when the project manager begins to prioritize this aspect of the project, the entire team learns its values. People will begin to be more proactive about cultivating relationships and identifying interpersonal or intercultural issues.

Culture is a dynamic creature, but as the leader, you get to set the trajectory. If you do not model a prioritization of healthy, functional, respectful relationships, your team won’t either. Keeping your finger on the pulse of the team requires energy, flexibility and creativity. Your effort will be rewarded in a high-performing cross-cultural team.

In conclusion, when a development project manager only has a few weeks on the ground with his or her team, it is easy to prioritize immediate results over relationship building. If you wind up in a cross-cultural collaboration that is stuck in a spiral of frustration, blame and stress, it is not always necessary to understand and dislodge every piece of tension. What I can promise is that if you keep plugging the same pieces into the equation, you will always get the same results. If you have been trying to move forward on an issue, try moving forward with the relationship.

From your experience, what are the effective ways to build and sustain trust in cross-cultural teams? Let us know by leaving a comment below.
Check out more insights and analysis provided to hundreds of Executive Members worldwide, and subscribe to the Development Insider to receive the latest news, trends and policies that influence your organization.

Emily Braucher

Founder and lead facilitator of ReFresh Intercultural Communication, Emily Braucher trains development professionals in communication for conflict prevention and management. She is also an experiential education expert with 10 years’ experience in Asia, Africa and Latin America.