Construction project management in the Persian Gulf: inter-cultural communication

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In an increasingly international construction market, communication problems will emerge as one of the most significant contemporary challenges facing construction project managers. An understanding of cultural diversity and the means of managing it will provide the ability to meet this challenge. This paper investigates the communication problems associated with cultural diversity between UK and Persian Gulf nationals on international construction projects. It concludes that there is a case for greater attention to cultural initiation programmes by UK construction companies wishing to operate efficiently in the Persian Gulf. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd and IPMA. All rights reserved

Introduction

While the construction industry remains relatively domestic in nature, compared with other industries, there is evidence of increasing international trade in the construction services.[1,2] The process of internationalisation will increase the cultural diversity of construction project organisations and thereby create new managerial challenges, not least, that of inter-cultural communications which has been ranked as the greatest problem facing international managers in other industries.[3–5] It would seem that the 'age-old' problem of poor communication, which preoccupied much of the industry's attentions in the 1960's and 1970's, may re-emerge again as one of the most critical contemporary issues facing the construction industry.[6–8]

The growing body of general international management literature suggests that the key to overcoming the problem of inter-cultural communication is to develop sensitivity to cultural diversity. The consensus is that cultural sensitivity encourages people to erode the behavioural differences which interfere with the communication process.[4] Within this context, this paper aims to investigate the level of cultural sensitivity which exists in the international construction industry. Since cultural variability interferes with the communication process to different extents and in different ways across different cultural boundaries, it is important to resist the temptation of universality in conducting a generic investigation. For this reason, this paper focuses upon the specific cultural interface between UK and Persian Gulf nationals. This is justified by the strategic importance of The Persian Gulf to the UK construction industry and by Hofstede,[9] who has shown that the countries of this region share many historic, economic, social, religious, demographic and political characteristics which provide some degree of cultural uniformity.

The strategic importance of the Gulf Region

The region known as the Gulf comprises the separate countries of Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and The United Arab Emirates. These are all Arab countries which lie on the southern shore of The Persian Gulf, the north shore being wholly controlled by Iran. While Iraq is theoretically classed as a gulf state, in economic terms it can be excluded because of its non-affiliation to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The Gulf region has always been an important trading route between the East and West, having been frequented by the Portuguese, Dutch, British and French. It was the prosperity created by the oil price booms of the early 1970's which acted as a catalyst to the rapid development of the Gulf construction market. A shortage of local skills, technology and materials created a timely bonanza for the US and European construction companies which were suffering

a domestic downturn in construction activity.[10] However, a decade of saturation, a drop in oil prices during the late 1980's and legislation to prevent western exploitation, brought the boom to an end, although there is still a thriving international construction market for infrastructure, industrial, power and high quality commercial projects.[11, 12] For example, Goldsmith[12] pointed to a 39% increase in orders for construction work in 1995, an average figure which included an increase of 100% for the UK.

The cultural identity of the Gulf

The Gulf's cultural identity, is most strongly represented in its language and religion. The official language of The Gulf is Arabic, a language which provides a very strong sense of collective identity to Gulf nationals.[13] The dominant religion is Islam, a word which translated, means "submission to the Will of Allah and obedience to his laws"[14]. These laws are set down in the Quran. In The Gulf, religion guides behaviour to a far greater extent than it does in the west, penetrating into every aspect of daily life. For this reason, an understanding of Islamic values is important for international manager, operating within this region. Ahmad[15] summarises these values under two headings, namely; Faith Pillars and Islam Pillars. There are six Faith Pillars; there is only one God, Allah; the teachings of all Allah's prophets are to be believed without discrimination; every nation had a messenger from Allah in the form of a prophet; the scriptures of Allah are the guiding light that show the right path; the world will end one day and the dead will rise for their final and fair trial; everything, good or evil, proceeds directly from the divine will. There are five Islam Pillars which are meant to distinguish between Muslims and non-Muslims. They define practical duties, which include; the recital of the Creed, "there is no god but Allah and Mohammed is the prophet of Allah"; five periods of prayer during the day and attendance at a Friday (Holy Day) Prayer service; fasting during the day-light hours of the holy month of Ramadhan; pilgrimage to Mecca for every adult Muslim, once in their lifetime.

Inter-cultural communication

The contemporary view of communication is that it is a cyclical process whereby people continuously share information over time, until they converge upon a mutually acceptable level of understanding.[16, 17] The overlap of people's 'perceptual fields', influences the degree of mutual understanding (convergence) which can occur between two individuals. Since the idea of culture is often explained using concepts similar to that of a perceptual field, it is evident that the issue of communication and culture are inextricably intertwined. For example, Fisher's[18] 'mind-set' and Deresky's[5] 'life-space' are particularly closely related concepts which are used to explain the origins of culture. In Fisher's and Deresky's view, culture represents the shared values, understandings, assumptions and goals that result in common mind-sets or life-spaces. These determine the attitudes, codes of conduct and expectations that guide people's behaviour and the way that they interpret messages.

Language and culture

While culture influences the communication process by determining peoples' mind-sets, its most obvious and tangible influence is in the form of language. By language, is meant, not only the verbal prose which are associated with different dialects, but also the non-verbal (silent) cues which are associated with the way people present themselves in an act of communication. Both categories of language are discussed below, the latter being given greater attention because of the 'high-context', nature of Arabic communication.[19] In high-context cultures it is typical for a large proportion of a message to be left unspecified and accessible only through non-verbal cues.

Verbal language

There is justification for international managers to develop at least some command of Arabic because language plays a particularly important role in providing a sense of pride and identity to Gulf nationals.[20, 21] While spoken Arabic varies in dialect from country to country, the syntax and morphology of written Arabic are essentially the same in all Arab countries. Despite some dilution of Arabic with western technical words, the written and spoken word is so different to the English language that communication problems with the uninitiated are almost inevitable. Although the adoption of English as the second language of The Gulf region, particularly in a business context, may alleviate this problem, levels of fluency vary considerably.[4]

Non-verbal (silent) language

The semantic element of communication provides an important medium which can be responsible for a large proportion of a message transmitted, particularly in high-context cultures.[22, 23] Deresky[5] refers to semantics as the silent element of communication and refers to its transmission through four broad mediums, namely; kinesics, proxemics, paralanguage and object-language.

Kinesics refers to body movements, postures, gestures, facial expressions and eye contact. While there may be some kinesics which transmit universal messages, there are many which are culturally specific and a potential source of misunderstanding.[24] For example, eye-to-eye contact is often avoided in Arabic cultures because humility is a major aspect of Islamic religion. In contrast, a lack of eye contact in western societies is likely to be interpreted as a sign of submission and weakness.[4]

Proxemics refers to territorial issues, associated with people's proximity during communication and to the value attributed to sensory involvement. It is widely accepted that the sense of personal space is not culturally standardised and that cultures can be classified along a continuum from high-contact to low-contact, the former valuing sensory involvement and the latter resenting it. Deresky[5] points out that high-contact cultures, such as the Arabic culture, are normally associated with hot climates and low-contact cultures, such as the Western European culture, with cold climates.

Paralanguage refers to how something is said rather than the content. The tone, inflection of the voice and rate of speech are all important in this respect, as is the cognitive route taken in conversations. For example, in contrast to Westerners, who like to come straight to the point, Arabs are more likely to skirt around a subject before addressing it. Furthermore, the rate of speech in Arabic countries is recognised as being lower than in Western societies, silence characterising a large proportion of a message and also carrying specific meanings.[25] For instance, in fear of losing face and in a desire to remain humble, Arabs are more likely to ignore something they disagree with, than openly reject or criticise it. This is understood within the Arabic culture and silence during communications carries strong connotations of disenchantment. Uninitiated Westerners are unlikely to detect these subtle messages and become frustrated with the relatively high levels of silence and the cognitive loops which characterise Arabic conversations. Indeed, Victor[4] points to a natural tendency to interject within conversation pauses, attempting to fill the gaps and bring the conversation to a speedier conclusion. Similarly, this could be frustrating to an Arab.

Object-language refers to messages transmitted through physical appearance and material artifacts such as clothing, cosmetics etc. For example, several researchers have observed a direct association between an individual's appearance and the way in which others evaluate them.[26] As Victor[4] points out, this tendency is stronger in some cultures than others, Arabic cultures seeing appearance as a particularly strong non-verbal communicator. For example, although Saudis' have become tolerant of foreigners in western business attire, it is well recognised that there is a limit to their tolerance of revealing clothes, particularly in the case of women.

Technology and uncertainty

In addition to language differences, different attitudes towards time and technology can interfere with the communication process, particularly during problematical periods.[27,28] This is significant because of the uncertainty of construction activity.

Victor[4] classifies a cultures' attitudes towards technology and uncertainty, under the headings of control, subjugation and harmonization. Those with control attitudes, are seen as ruthlessly unspiritual in believing that technology represents the means to best control an uncertain environment. The subjugation view is that technology is at best neutral and can have little influence over environmental forces. Finally, the harmonization view is the most naturalistic and conformative, seeing technology in a negative sense and as a cause of environmental imbalance. The Arabic culture is placed in the subjugation category since Islam encourages a relatively fatalistic attitude towards environmental instability, seeing it as difficult to control. However, where a crisis demands attention to a problem, the cautious attitude towards technology, encourages face-to-face contact, personal attention and subjective, emotive arguments, as the best means of resolution.

Time

Doob[29] and Hall and Hall[23] demonstrate how attitudes towards time are culturally diverse, classifying western cultures as monochronic and Arabic cultures as Polychronic. Monochronic cultures differ from polychronic cultures in that the former encourages a highly structured, time-ordered approach to life and the latter, a more flexible, indirect approach based more upon personal relationships than scheduled commitments. In polychronic cultures it is common for business issues to be delayed in order to establish or reaffirm sound personal relationships. Furthermore, directness and haste in the tackling of contentious issues is interpreted as inconsiderate and confrontational and to be avoided whenever possible. Almaney and Alwan[20] have observed the frustrations that can arise between people of monochronic and polychronic cultures, particularly in negotiations and pressurised situations.

Values

Hofstede[9] ranked the values of different cultures along the four dimensions of power-distance (level of hierarchy, equality and participative decision making in a society), uncertainty-avoidance (extent to which uncertainty, risk is tolerated), individualism (family loyalty and selfishness in a society), masculinity (the level of assertiveness, aggression, confrontation in a society). The comparative scores for the UK and Arab countries is shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1 indicates substantial differences between the cultural values of UK and Arabic nationals which have the potential to interfere with communication effectiveness. For example, the greater acceptance of power by Arabs, may create tensions during claim negotiations with UK nationals, where the former are unlikely to permit participation in decision-making and expect decisions to be accepted rather than challenged. The opposite would be expected by a UK national, who would be accustomed to a relatively low-power distance and confrontational culture. Furthermore, the relatively high uncertainty-avoidance of Arabs indicates a tendency to rely upon rules and procedures, a trait which may be particularly frustrating for a UK national with a relatively low uncertainty-avoidance. This would be particularly true during a crisis or in a highly innovative project, where the benefits of flexibility would be most apparent. In a similar way, the relatively high level of individualism displayed by a UK national may cause problems because Arabs would tend to perceive it as being disloyal, dishonorable and selfish.

Table 1 Comparison of Arabic and UK values based upon Hofstede's dimensions (source: Hofstede[9])

Value dimension	UK	Gulf States
Power distance	35	80
Uncertainty avoidance	35	68
Individualism	89	38
Masculinity	66	53

Investigating cross-cultural communication problems within a construction context

The above literature demonstrates the potential for misunderstandings between UK and Arabic nationals. To investigate the extent to which this exists within international construction projects, a questionnaire survey was undertaken which focused upon UK nationals with experience of international construction projects in The Gulf. Its aim was to investigate, in a preliminary fashion, the sensitivity of UK nationals to Arabic culture within international construction projects so that more detailed investigations could be conducted.

After a pilot study based upon a sample of eight respondents, a full sample of 77 UK nationals were randomly drawn from the data bases of The British Consultants Bureau (BCB), The Export Group for the Construction Industry (EGCI) and the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates–Oman (PEIE). A response rate of 77% provided a real sample of 59 of which 59% resided in the UK and 41% in The Gulf. The average age of the sample was 44 years, 42% of the sample had more than 5 years experience in the Gulf construction industry and both contractors and consultants were represented by the proportions of 32% and 68% respectively.

The research results

What follows is a descriptive account of the research results. The results are presented in two formats, namely; percentage terms and indexes which are derived from a 'score-analysis' of questionnaire responses. The score analysis measured the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with statements which reflected the nature of Arabic culture as described by the literature. The resulting index (I) ranges from $+1$ to -1 and indicates the strength of agreement or disagreement respectively.

Language

While language differences are recognised as one of the major sources of communication problems, only 24% of the sample had made any attempt to learn Arabic. Sixty-four percent of the Arabic speakers had acquired their proficiency through experience rather than formal training and 86% had done so reactively, after arrival in the Gulf. In terms of fluency, 79% of the Arabic speakers classified themselves as low, 14% as medium and 7% as high. These results reflect the general consensus (I = 0.36) that language is not seen as a significant barrier to communication in international construction projects, an attitude that disagrees with the literature (I = -0.28), which argues that it is important to speak Arabic to work effectively in The Gulf. This is probably because English is the international language of construction contracts and is widespread in use throughout The Gulf region. However, the research also uncovered a contradiction which is reflected in a consensus (I = 0.42) that being able to speak Arabic has the ability to increase levels of trust within business relationships in The Gulf. This is a contradiction which must be addressed by construction companies, since it indicates a linguistic complacency which creates the potential for misunderstanding and conflict, places UK companies at a commercial disadvantage and creates unnecessary division within international project organisational structures. In general, these are disappointing results since language difficulties are arguably the most obvious and easily remedied source of potential communication problems in The Gulf. Indeed, the results reflect a lack of understanding of the importance of language to Arabs and a failure to understand the gratitude that may be gained from attempting to learn and use Arabic.

Silent language

The research investigated attitudes towards eye-to-eye contact, body-language, tactility, personal-space, appearance and silence in communications. In general, the results only weakly supported (I = 0.14) the literature, which pointed to an Arabic culture of humility and low-contact. The greatest level of agreement was attributed to the importance of touch in Arabic conversation (I = 0.54) and also to the importance of appearance (I = 0.31). However, there very little agreement with the view that eye-to-eye contact makes Arabs feel uncomfortable (I = -0.26).

The overall level of agreement of 0.14, across the range of questions relating to silent language, could indicate that the culture of a construction project in The Gulf differs significantly to that of the national culture. However, there is no reason to believe that people's behaviour will temporarily change when they participate within a construction project and in this sense, it is more likely to indicate a potentially dangerous insensitivity to the Arabic culture. This conclusion is supported by the discovery that those with more than 5 years experience in The Gulf, show a slightly higher level of agreement with the literature (I = 0.04) than those with less than one years experience (I = -0.07). While this may have been expected, it affirms the importance of deploying experienced personnel on international projects. This is particularly important on projects characterised by relatively high levels of uncertainty where unexpected problems are likely to arise. During such periods, communication skills are of the utmost importance in diffusing potential disputes.

Time

The results of a score-analysis relating to the cultural variable of time and uncertainty coincided with the main-stream literature, in classifying the Arabic culture as polychronic (I = 0.22). That is, it was agreed that Arabs are non-linear, responsive, informal and flexible in resolving problems and planning projects. More precisely, they take a fatalistic approach to problem solving (I = 0.30); greatly value face-to-face communications (I = 0.52); handle multiple tasks and tend to ignore schedules (I = 0.15); prefer spontaneity and informality in meetings (I = 0.44); build personal relationships before formalising business relationships (I = 0.41); see time commitments as desirable but not binding (I = 0.46). It would seem that there is a healthy level of cultural sensitivity relating to issues of time and an awareness that the rigid imposition of schedules may be counterproductive in The Gulf region.

Values

Score indexes for variables relating to power-distance coincided with the literature relating to Arabic culture (I = 0.55). That is: Arabs tend to be unquestioning of decisions (I = 0.42); it is important to account for hierarchical status and titles when communicating with Arabs (I = 0.65); decision-making is highly centralised in Arabic firms (I = 0.58). The perception is that Arabs have a relatively high respect for authority, organisational status and a tendency to work through hierarchies. Herein lies a subtle paradox which international managers should be aware of. It is that despite respecting authority and hierarchical protocol, Arabs also like flexibility and informality in business relations. While a UK national may feel at ease with the informality of Arabs, the tendency to follow hierarchical chains of command is likely to produce frustrations in slowing down the decision-making process. This is particularly true during periods when time is of the essence.

In terms of uncertainty-avoidance, individuality and masculinity, the results also coincide with the literature in confirming a degree of sympathy and sensitivity to an Arab's relatively high level of risk aversity. This is reflected in the belief that: men are more effective at communicating with Arabs than women (I = 0.32); the establishment of long-term relationships with a client is a prerequisite to winning work (I = 0.32); political considerations are important in selecting business partners in The Gulf (I = 0.57); groups play an important part in decision-making within The Gulf (I = 0.32). The implication of these findings is that UK companies intending to invest in this region should not underestimate the importance of taking a long-term view of investment, and the likely success to be had from joint-venture or partnering type agreements. Furthermore, the industry appears to reflect the macho culture of the UK industry, although the negative attitude towards women appears to be softening. Those with 1990's experience of The Gulf agreed far less strongly (I = 0.35) than those with 1970's experience (I = 0.75), that men were more effective at communicating with Arabs. Furthermore, there was a contradictory tendency to avoid litigation, wherever discussion presented a viable alternative to dispute resolution (I = 0.41). In essence, the likelihood is that dispute is as much a macho characteristic of the Gulf construction industry as it is of the UK industry, but that it is likely to be resolved differently.

Technology and uncertainty

The data relating to the issue of technology and uncertainty did not correspond with the literature relating to Arabic culture. The perception was that Arabs had a control orientation (I = 0.41) whereas the literature categorised them under the subjugation category. This is worrying because it indicates a tendency for UK nationals to frustrate Arabs by spending too much time in the planning stage of projects.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the degree of sensitivity which UK nationals have towards the Arabic culture, within the environment of an international construction project. The aim was to predict potential communication problems which could reduce the efficiency of construction activity. In essence, the results indicate low levels of sensitivity to Arabic values and to an Arab's concept of time, and clear insensitivities to the importance of the Arabic language and an Arab's attitude towards uncertainty. In all, the results are not very encouraging because such insensitivities create significant potential for misunderstanding and conflict within The Gulf construction industry. Indeed, this may hold true in other overseas construction industries and be one of the reasons why the level of conflict on international projects is much higher than in domestic projects.[30] If, on the other hand, it was subsequently found that people do adapt their normal cultural behavioural habits when they participate within construction projects, then a more encouraging conclusion can be drawn. This is that there is a high level of cultural sensitivity and that The Gulf construction industry has a unique micro-culture which differs from that of the Arabic culture in which it is immersed. This would indicate that during the early stages of an international construction project, there may be a process of cultural negotiation at play where project participants from varied cultural backgrounds, adapt certain aspects of their cultural behaviour to better fit those of their new business counterparts of adversaries. However, until this process is proved to occur, the previous conclusion must hold and provide justification for greater attention to cultural initiation programmes by UK companies wishing to work in the Gulf construction industry.

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