

# **INTERNATIONAL PROJECT STEPS: MOVING OVER THE EDGE A PHASE MODEL FOR OVERCOMING THE PITFALLS IN PROJECTS WITH MULTI-MENTALIZED TEAMS**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the merging markets and expanding fields of business we can observe a constant growth of international projects with big differences between language and culture, the need for better written and verbal communication (i.e. virtual teams, email, Internet usage) in conjunction with the global language "English" as a common tool. Many projects still have problems in execution, arising from poor planning that has its roots in ignoring the special international aspects. One can imagine different approaches to solving these problems; one is to follow a suitable basic phase model that focuses on the needs of co-operation and collaboration in multi-mentalized teams. A multicultural project team of experienced "project-people" (all of whom are members of GPM German Association for Project Management) developed a supplement to the already known general toolbox of PM over a two-year period. Many of these insights and knowledge access-points are published in various contributions to this World Congress, which also sees the publication of a new book about International Project Management by this team.

This paper introduces a well-proven structure that characterises the core steps of each international project and models some of the typical pitfalls in each step. We share knowledge and experience about the difference in each step compared to a national or mono-cultural project. In addition, we present tips, tricks and clear recommendations for overcoming these difficulties. We also introduce some new methods, adopted from other disciplines, to support the project manager in his daily tasks. All our findings are derived from our own background which is mainly German. But the principles and basic approaches can be applied for the perspective of each mentality.

## **2. THE NEED FOR A PHASE-RELATED AWARENESS**

### **Different cultures lead to different styles in the course of a project**

In an international environment, many aspects are different from what one knows or experiences out of the national context. In an international - or multi-cultural - context many phases do have other focal points and new challenging issues are to be mastered. Experience proves, that in some cultures, there is more emphasis on phase-oriented project work whilst others foster different aspects such as communication networks, success criteria etc. As the phase-oriented planning of a project is well-known in the western countries and plays a central role in many PM-approaches within companies it seems to be quite appropriate to take a closer look on that topic.

In principle, a phase model as basic planning tool should be developed individually and should be tailored to the certain application. Each project is different with own starting conditions, constraints, objectives and intended deliverables. This leads to the fact that not only the duration of the phases can vary compared to other cultures but also the order of the phases is changed or even other phases are emphasized than "at home".

From the project managers point of view will obviously pop-up two questions: "*How to provide a first (rough) schedule-oriented structure to my new project?*" and "*What are the benefits for my international project if I am going to make use of a phase model?*". Well, there are some reasons. First, it can be mandatory to present a phase model to the client that has to be approved (e.g. according to contractual regulations, branch specific stan-

dards or official conditions). Second, it may be part of an implemented PM-system within an organisation to develop a phase model as part of the planning-process and the project manager has to follow this standard under the framework of a cooperation (e.g. with consortium partners, financiers etc.).

But this is not only a certain workload to be done, a phase model offers on the other hand some significant advantages that help to overcome potential inter-cultural gaps. The milestones usually located at the end of a phase (e.g. tollgate-concepts) are supportive to overcome crucial decisional situations. Additionally, through the separated parts (steps, phases, sections) of a project, all controlling and steering activities are supported to move over the stumbling edge. Especially if there are people involved with various cultural backgrounds the planning process for a project has to be done together. Expectations about detailing of planning results as well as the individual obligations that result from these plannings can differ significantly in diverse cultures. To give an example, we need very detailed determinations in Japan whereas in the US there are substantial regulations expected and in Germany we are used to start with a more general approach which then gets more detailed step-by-step.

### 3. A BASIC PHASE-MODEL FOR INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS

Unfortunately, it is not realistic to have “the one and only” phase model available which is valid for international projects in general. The different branches and applications are too different from each other. Nevertheless, a structure that is inherent in most of these concepts can be conducted by analysing the various existing approaches. This leads to a generic and easy-to-understand phase model consisting of 6 main phases (including the respective milestones as shown in illustration 1) which can be found with different names and distinctions in many international projects:

1. **Impulse**
2. **Initiation**
3. **Planning** (if necessary divided up in general- and detailed planning)
4. **Realisation**
5. **Termination**
6. **Follow-Up**

The first as well as the last phase is quite often not yet recognized as being part of the project. Instead, they are treated as a series of pre- and post-project activities with - more or less - loose ends. But the practical experience shows that they are very important for the overall project’s success especially in the multi-cultural context so it is strongly recommended that they are considered in the international approach.

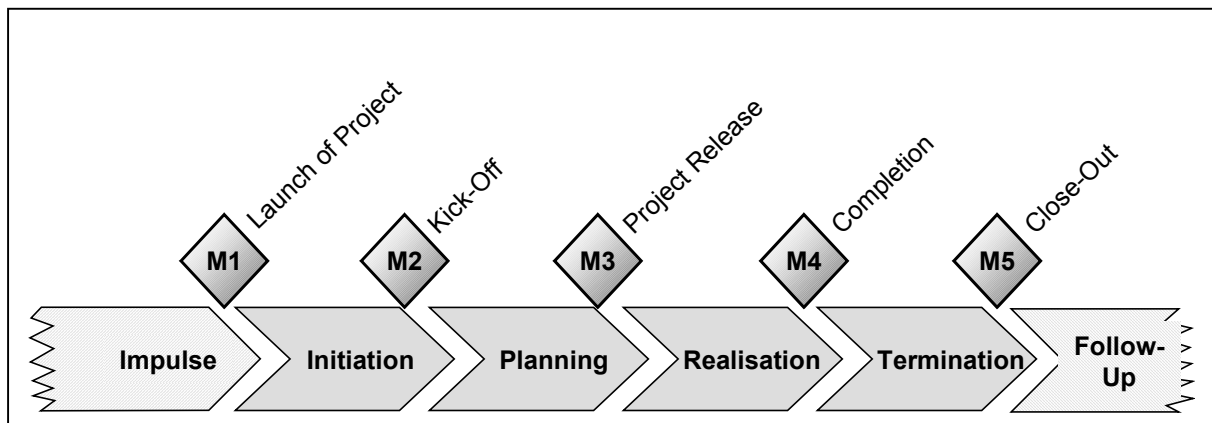


Illustration 1: Generic Life-Cycle model for international projects

This model in general is valid for all international projects and is similar to the well-known standard phase-models. But our approach goes one step ahead by providing an additional structure and informational elements within each phase. So our findings and recommendations per phase are clustered as follows:

- a) **Particularities from international projects’ perspective**
- b) **Pitfalls and Obstacles**
- c) **Crucial recommendations**

The „crucial recommendations“ are to be seen as shorthand-like pinpoints which help to get sensitive for these issues. But it seems not to be appropriate to reduce advice in intercultural issues on just a couple of sentences. Thus the project manager gets a first orientation and red line for the sometimes very complex interrelations. He/she is then able to care for professional support and further guidance. Additional facts, aspects and constraints that result from the involvement of multi-mentalized team members can be valid in every project apart from those mentioned. Hence, not every recommendation is to be understood as “flat-rate” advice.

Altogether, there is one important fact to remember: Conducting an international project is much more complex than simply doing a project as usual - but in English language. The project manager has to move over the national edge.

#### 4. SAMPLE FINDINGS FOR SELECTED ISSUES

By the following chapter, we want to show with the example of one selected phase (project planning) which findings have to be considered. It is representative for the whole approach. Everything is depending on two basic insights of long years experience in the business with multi-mentalized project teams: first, there is the need but also opportunity to learn from others - best to be done by sharing experience. Second, each project manager with his own cultural background and script for communication needs a special sensibility in the inter-cultural context.

##### 4.1 Example: Phase 3 „Project Planning“

**Milestone as result:** Project Release

This phase is often sub-divided in general- and detailed planning, in practice it can also be called “concept phase” etc. In this phase the requirements stated in the chartering document are develop towards a more precise approach for realisation. As a result, various planning documents can be issued on different levels of detailing. At this time, it is very important to catch up the complexity of the project and develop a mutual strategy how to conduct the project. At the latest at this point, the start-up workshop will be conducted which should be shared with all relevant people who are supposed to participate in the project.

##### a) Particularities from international projects' perspective

- The process of defining the objectives and goals of the project (product-related as well as process-related) should gain highest priority, even if it seems to be very challenging. This process has to be done openly with integrated participation of all team members.
- Other cultures are not as „planning-minded“ as the German approach assumes. As an example, in France and Italy it is not considered necessary to conduct an in-depth planning at the front-end of a project. Obviously, the effect of the different cultural dimensions can be experienced. The intensity of involvement and participation is often determined by the individual need for avoidance of uncertainty. The contrary can be observed in the Asian area where the planning is done much more precisely.
- If there are more cultures involved than the own, there can be a significantly higher need for time. The effort for co-ordination of planning contributions at meetings will differ from the experience made so far. There is a higher demand for communication, exchange of information and agreements on mutual integration.
- It is unavoidable and necessary to develop a planning process for the project as a whole. This should be a joint approach for all people involved as an appropriate intermediate form between extreme detailing and rough orientation. It can also be a flexible and adoptable framework that can be adjusted (e.g. by emphasising different levels) according to the different cultures involved in the project.

##### b) Pitfalls and Obstacles

- Team members coming from different corporate- or national cultures can have totally different understandings about the significance and content of planning or planning results.
- Representatives from other countries may value the obligation resulting from the committed planning documents on a completely different level than oneself would expect.

- There is not enough time invested for the perception of cultural particularities of all team members. An appropriate time frame for stipulation, communication and transfer of these particularities in order to recognise and understand the differences of “the others” is lacking.
- The part of the budget for international travelling and communication is too small. Sometimes, it is a helpful trick to understand this portion of the budget as cost for an “insurance premium” to ensure the projects success.
- The importance of a structured and consistent risk management procedure is underestimated and the necessary processes and interaction between the people involved from different cultures are not supported accordingly.

**c) Crucial recommendations**

- The communication plan has to consider the particularities of communication styles in different cultures.
- Each team member should be allowed to inform the others about ones own attitude towards planning so that a joint understanding can derive from this tuned perspective.
- Awareness during communication with other people is necessary in order to determine if even though there seems to be a verbal acceptance, a hidden resistance can still be included in the wording or the agreement might only be given under non-pronounced reservation.

**4.2 Selected findings from other phases**

The findings shown so far are all referring to one exemplary phase. In order to provide a deeper insight in the findings for the other 5 core phases of this phase model, the following illustration 2 provides some additional but random extracts to stimulate the readers process of reflection and in-depth considerations of the own attitude and behaviour in international projects so far.

Finding	Phase	Type
The quality and sustainability of a relationship in international context will be determined quite often with the first meeting between people. The unconscious willingness to find proof for existing prejudices or even develop new ones is significantly high. If the project manager does not work against this unconscious willingness of the participating individuals the later upcoming problems are really pre-determined.	1 Impul.	P
To request for and accept an intercultural coaching of all executives and managers involved in the project.	1 Impul.	R
The process of stakeholder integration is much more complex and ticklish than in national projects.	2 Initiat.	P
Insufficient or wrong communication. This is valid for verbal communication (e.g. different skills in vocal expression and language abilities of the team members) as well as non-verbal communication (e.g. gestures or mimics are not perceived or interpreted in a wrong way).	2 Initiat.	O
In the international environment, there is a much higher need for joint development rules of the game for consorting with each other. This is valid for the daily business life as well as in crises or tense situations. The necessary time for this clarifying process should be invested as early as possible.	2 Initiat.	H
In many cases, it is very difficult to estimate the real project progress as in some cultures people tend to report only successes, whereas in other cultures, mainly the potential problems will be communicated. In some cultures, there is the danger that problems and risks may be concealed until it is too late to take preventive or counter measures. Thus the project performance and progress has to be reported very clearly and in a manner that can be understood by all team members without blaming anyone.	4 Realis.	O
In case that a project manager is not quite sure about the necessity and appropriateness of interventions or changes he/she should make use of a “cultural interpreter”.	4 Realis.	R
The two topics „re-patriation“ and „re-location“ need a long time for preparation and do have an extreme high significance for the persons concerned.	5 Term.	P
There is the sounding and frequently asked for approach to present the jointly gained project results finally together as a team. This is often far from reality and can not be recommended. In some cultures, the close-down of a project will offensively be used by individuals to profile themselves in front of the executive or customer. This can lead to the effect, that content or final results get lost.	5 Term.	O
Index type: P = Particularity, O = Obstacle / Pitfall, R = Recommendation		

**Illustration 2: Selected Findings for further phases in international projects**

## 5. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE OVERALL CONDUCTION OF A PROJECT

Finally, we can deduct some general annotations and advices that are resulting from real-life mistakes in project practice. They are not fixed to a specific phase but can accompany an international project along the whole life cycle:

- It is imperative to gain precise knowledge about project environment and context. In each project phase, the project manager should try to catch up the fine movements and changes in his/her environment.
- It should be avoided to conduct project planning mainly according to national aspects and experiences while the realisation of the project has to be done according to international conditions.
- It is important to plan a project at first on an international level and later do the realisation in the different parts in different countries according to mere national aspects. But it is still very important that the cross-project control of the whole project is kept of an international niveau.
- If in a project individuals from different cultures are cooperating and interacting, it seems quite often that they use same methods and follow equivalent procedures. But these could be interpreted in totally different ways and the team members may concentrate on very different core issues.
- If a project gets troubled there are quite often very different opinions and expectations about the way how to overcome that situation. In that critical situation, it is an necessary obligation for the project manager to ensure a common understanding of the problem and to care about a joint development of a procedure to solve that problem.
- There is quite often a typical „German“ demand for clarification and avoidance of uncertainty. Many other cultures regard this as totally overdone and superfluous. For the project manager, it is important to develop a certain ambiguity tolerance.

## 5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the international project business new problems and areas of specific needs are popping up that can have significant impact on the course of the project. The basic phases in international projects need special awareness. Especially in multi-mentalized teams, the project manager has to beware of special pitfalls. This paper offers a generic phase model for international projects that regards the particularities and obstacles of these phases and provides some crucial recommendations as a set of basic “tricks of the trade” for project managers.

As a final conclusion, we would like to close with a quotation that has been used in a multi-national project for the implementation of PM:

*“Each individual with his mentality contributes a unique melody to the sound of projects.  
The best piece of advice for the Project Manager is: Listen, Enjoy, Join in - and stay tuned”.*

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