

Project management and national culture: A Dutch–French case study

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Abstract

This case study explores the impact of national context in the integration of project management. It analyses the implementation of project management during a Dutch/French cooperation. Evaluation and monitoring are easily adopted by the Dutch whereas they are avoided by the French partners.

This qualitative and inductive research unravels the entanglement of the practice in two different contexts. It sheds light on the role of Dutch consensus as making the transfer of the practice easier. It reveals the difficulty encountered in making project management a part of French logic of “métier”. The research underlines the fact that weak and limited articulations between the individual and the group and between the persons and their activities are key factors in the appropriation of project management.

This paper is also theoretically oriented. It proposes an analytical framework adapted to investigate managerial practices within their contexts of implementation.

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1. Introduction

Despite the belief that managerial tools and processes can be exported worldwide, a different reality is often experienced at the local workplace. Even within Europe, the transfer of managerial practices can take a long time. Implementation of a new management process can be subjected to avoidance, resistance or rejection. When this occurs, a manager may wonder why and seek the source of the problem.

A portrayal of managerial tools as objective and universal is mainly a matter of a dominant discourse. Yet, it is difficult to think of a practice as “suspended in the air”, detached from actors and their contexts. Managerial practices are both designed and implemented within defined political, institutional and social contexts. They interact with cooperation and coordination processes. Whereas

the logic inherent to a practice is consistent with the context in which it has been elaborated, it may be at odds with the local contexts to which it is transferred. In which case, a manager will strive to reconcile the practice and the context. He/she will benefit from knowledge about the underlying logics that govern such a situation.

This research explores the influence of national context in the implementation of project management (PM). It takes advantage of a critical situation, a Dutch/French cooperation project in the field of R&D. The two partners adopt contrasting positions towards managerial aspects of the project and, more specifically, monitoring and evaluation. The research identifies the logics at stake and their interplay.

This paper describes the theoretical background for this research (Section 2) and the background for this case study (Section 3). Then, the text proceeds with the description of the case (Section 4). It analyzes the procedures and unfolding of the project and further interprets the perception of Dutch and French partners about the project, its

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evaluation and monitoring. The last section discusses the origin of the discrepancy between Dutch and French partners and proposes methodological developments (Section 5).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. National context and management

In this research, national culture is taken in a broad sense. It includes that is shared within a nation such as a common language, common political, legal and educational systems. We prefer the term national context because existing studies on national cultures either tend to evacuate the context or to minimize a part of the context which is important for management studies. The nation appears as a pertinent area among other relevant areas such as the organizational context. Although this work targets the national context, all contextual aspects contribute to and reinforce each other.

The literature about national culture and management can be summarized according to three main positions and the corresponding underlying assumptions. For the sake of clarity, I only refer to few representative scholars among them.

– A first stream of research considers that management has nothing to do with national culture: it is governed by objective practices and autonomous actors (Peters and Waterman, 1982). This “universalistic” current is criticized because it cannot make a distinction between a universal and a dominant form of management.

– A second current of research derives from psychology. Cross Cultural Studies (CCS) measure countries along few dimensions such as individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance or masculinity (Hofstede, 1991, 2001). CCS are based on the assumption that dimensions are common in nature and that national cultures are comparable. These dimensions reflect actors’ attitudes rather than their contexts. CCS have been criticized for inherent theoretical and methodological biases (Berry et al., 2002; Kim et al., 1994; Chapman, 1996). They remain very popular among international managers even though they are badly equipped to provide relevant information on national contexts.

– A third stream of research is often referred to as an emic current (in opposition to an etic current which includes CCS). It postulates that a culture is characterized by its uniqueness and consequently, there are no common dimensions and no possible direct comparisons between cultures (Chapman, 1996). Deriving from symbolic anthropology (Geertz, 1973) this current mobilizes in-depth qualitative inductive studies in order to unravel indigenous (native) categories of interpretation of the reality. National culture is defined as a singular way to interpret the reality, a set of symbolic categories, a context of meaning (d’Iribarne, 1996). This stream has a high potential for management studies and has already accumulated substantial results. However, it is limited by two drawbacks:

- It has not developed tools or indicators to federate a collection of independent case studies.
- By focusing on culture as a context of meaning, it tends to underestimate culture as a context of action (Friedberg, 2005). Culture also influences practices, an aspect which is important in the field of management.

Until now, we have referred the permanent aspect of cultures but there is also a dynamic component. More than ever, culture is challenged by a world in rapid and constant evolution. The stability inherent in cultural studies hardly reconcile with today’s rapid evolution. According to process theories (Weick, 1995, 2001) the meaning is permanently co-constructed, negotiated and renewed in association with action. Sense making integrates the diversity and complexity of organizational situations. Despite their attractive and fashionable character, these process theories have two drawbacks:

- They are seldom validated by concrete case studies (Autissier, 2006).
- Sense making is considered as context free. It does not integrate the political, institutional and social contexts in which the sense is built (Weber and Glynn, 2006).

These considerations lead to the conclusion that cultural evolution does not exclude the existence of structural components. Culture includes permanence and evolution and these two aspects are to be investigated by independent (and complementary) approaches.

2.2. Theoretical contribution to the field

2.2.1. Integrating context of action in cultural studies

As previously described, CCS are context free and inductive studies are almost exclusively oriented towards the context of interpretation. Considering that culture is not only a context of meaning but also a context of action, management processes deserve more attention than the starting point of inductive studies. I propose to centre the analysis at the articulation between the context of meaning and the context of action and to conduct a dialogue between actions and interpretation of these actions. This is important because:

- Management is turned on action rather than on interpretations. Implementation of a practice is essentially action driven.
- Actions and discourses about actions are not directly linked. Brunsson (2002) uses the word “hypocrisy” to reflect the relation between thoughts, decisions and actions.
- It is possible that the articulation between thoughts and actions is culturally dependent. This hypothesis is a wide open research question.

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