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# Emergent project management: how foreign managers can leverage local knowledge

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**Abstract**

Emergence is the evolution of order bottom-up from local knowledge. Emergent Project Management is the method of using emergence to elicit local knowledge, integrate it with the global knowledge, and use the integrated knowledge to manage projects more effectively. Foreign mangers can leverage local knowledge using this method. The five key components of Emergent Project Management, based on the concept of Emergent Design [IBM Systems Journal 39 (2000) 768] are: (1) Constructionism, (2) Technological fluency, (3) Immersive environments, (4) Applied epistemological anthropology, and (5) Critical inquiry. Project managers who want to transcend state, regional, national, cultural, organizational and industry boundaries in today's global economy will need these new cognitive and behavioral skills.



*Keywords:* Managing projects; International projects; Culture; Emergent project management

Emergence is an old concept that has found renewed application today to explain the appearance of order from chaos in complex systems [2–4]. It is the evolution of order bottom-up from local knowledge in contrast to the imposition of order top-down utilizing global knowledge [4]. In this paper we extend the concept of emergence to project management and call it Emergent Project Management. We discuss how foreign managers can learn to leverage local knowledge to create order from apparent disorder, integrate it with their global knowledge, and consequently manage their projects effectively. A foreign manager connotes, in the most general sense, one that may be from a different state, region, country, culture, organization, or industry. In the following, first we will review the literature on learning and knowledge in project management, then discuss and illustrate the concept of local knowledge, and last develop the concept of emergent project management and how it can be used by foreign managers.

In his recent paper Kotnour [5, p. 32] poses the question: "How is learning integrated in the project management process to learn continuously from project experience and increase capabilities for the future?" In response he uses Juran's [6] plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle "to represent the learning process in a project environment" [5, p. 33]. He uses the PDSA cycle to explain how project managers learn "within and between projects" [5, p. 32]. Intraproject "[l]earning takes place when project team members discuss approaches for completing a task or overcoming problems" [5, p. 34]. Such learning creates a body of local knowledge. "Interproject knowledge learning is the combining and sharing of lessons learned across projects to develop new knowledge" [5, p. 34]. Interproject learning, in contrast to intraproject learning, should lead to more global knowledge that can be transferred laterally across contexts and then applied locally. Ideally, one would hope that repeated cycles of intraproject and interproject learning would lead to a global body of knowledge—something akin to a unified theory of project management. However, such a theory is likely to be a "chimera" [7, p. 21] because of the complexity of the projects and the heterogeneity of the environments in which these projects need to be managed. Consequently, any global knowledge will always have to be used in conjunction with local knowledge—the latter supplementing the former and sometimes supplanting it—to

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manage projects effectively. Thus, to use knowledge effectively, project managers will require cognitive and behavioral competencies [7] to:

- Generate [8] local knowledge that supplements his or her global knowledge. In other words, to learn local knowledge.
- Dissipate [8], or translate into action, such local knowledge in conjunction with the global knowledge. In other words, to act on local knowledge.

Understanding these competencies will enhance the PDSA cycle by articulating the semiotic processes [8] underlying planning, doing, studying, and acting—the four components of PDSA.

Much of the conventional literature on project management focuses on global knowledge—its acquisition and application [7,9]. It takes a top-down, and what many may say is a western, view and is silent on the interplay of local and global knowledge. That is natural, given the origins of the concept of project management and its widespread application in the west. However today, with a rising number of global projects in an increasing number of sectors ranging from economic development to advanced research, it would be appropriate to ask the question: How can a project manager acquire local knowledge and apply the same effectively in conjunction with his or her global knowledge? Part of the answer is provided by a growing body of literature that focuses on the effects of differences in culture, industry, and other factors on project management and how to adapt to these differences [10–17]. This literature can sensitize a project manager to a variety of local factors and provide guidelines to handle them. Yet it is inadequate. Metaphorically, it gives the project manager a "fish"; it does not teach the manager how to "fish". The possible variations in local conditions are so many and so dynamic that it would be impossible to enumerate and provide recommendations a priori to handle all of them, except perhaps at the most general level. Consider for example the issue of cultural differences. They may manifest themselves in the project personnel's punctuality, deference to authority, non-verbal behavior, and the work ethic. While macro cultural categories such as the one developed by Hofstede [18] are good and appropriate to explain these differences they may be inadequate to provide the micro-level guidance to develop the needed cognitive and behavioral competencies required for effective day-to-day project management. Consequently, although many companies have cross-cultural training, "[t]he programs deliver dismal performance when it comes to multicultural project management. The reason: they leave intact the old belief that one project management fits all cultures" [11, p. 27]. Part of the solution to this problem is to discard "the belief that one project management fits all cultures," and to adopt "a new paradigm that project team members with different cultural backgrounds interpret the same project management practices differently" [11, p. 27]. An even more proactive approach would be to build on indigenous knowledge [1,19,20] to: (a) "Work from local knowledge and interests", (b) "Bridge to other knowledge domains", and (c) "Liberate their local knowledge from its specific situated embodiment" [1, p. 780]. Such an approach could help adoption and implementation of new methodologies (to that context) such as project management "to be based in, and grow from, the existing culture [and context]" [1, p. 770]. It could help prevent some of the failures due to "incompatibility of imported project organization structures and the attitudes and values of the local employees" [15, p. 53].

In the following we will first describe the concept of local knowledge in project management with a few illustrative examples. Then we will describe a model of "Emergent Project Management" based on Cavallo's [1] concept of emergent design and apply it to show how the mistakes made in the examples could have been avoided and, on the contrary, local knowledge could have been harnessed to advantage. We will conclude with a discussion of how Emergent Project Management can be used in many different contexts.

## 1. Local knowledge in project management

In this section we will describe the characteristics of local knowledge drawing upon the literature in anthropology, psychology, and organizational theory and illustrate its role in project management with examples we have called "Unclean feet" and "Local time". These examples are from the personal experience of one of the authors who is a construction project management consultant in India. They will illustrate how lack of local knowledge can impede effective project management.

Local knowledge is "what ordinary folk know" [20, p. 4]. Sillitoe [20, p. 4] describes it as follows from an anthropological perspective:

> It is fragmentarily distributed, exists nowhere as a totality. Although more widely shared than specialized scientific knowledge, no one person, institution, or authority encompasses it all. There may be a certain patterning here, some clustering of knowledge within populations (e.g. by gender, age, etc., or according to specialist status, maybe reflecting political or ritual power). There is no grand repository, and hence no coherent overall theoretical model, although some coherence may be achieved in cosmologies, rituals and symbolic discourse, which is notoriously difficult to access. It is as much skill as knowledge, and its learning