

Developing Skills Through the Use of Matrixed Project Teams in the International Management Classroom

Jeffrey A. Mello

Department of Management and Entrepreneurship, Hofstra University, USA

Abstract. How we teach our students about international management is as, if not more, important than what we teach them. With increasing demands from and expectations of employers, accreditors, and students for enhanced communication, teamwork, analytical, and project management skills which aid in both finding employment and early career success, this paper presents a framework for the international management course which maximizes both the learning of subject matter content and the development of professional workplace skills.

Keywords: international management, project teams, pedagogy.

1. Employer Needs in a Global Economy

The highly volatile global economy exists in a state of heightened connectivity and increased technological development where an overwhelming amount of data needs to be rapidly processed in order to make decisions (Capelli & Keller 2014; Roach 2007; Whitely 2009). This kind of environment mandates the need for employees to have well-developed interpersonal, communication and teamwork skills (Caudron 1999; Ingols & Shapiro 2014; Shuayto 2013). The increased use of teams and collective decision making in organizations and the associated need for teamwork skills have increased dramatically in recent years (Applebaum & Blatt 1994; Taninecz 1997). Studies have shown that more than 80% of organizations employ multiple types of workplace teams (Cohen & Bailey 1997; Sundstrom 1999).

Employers are increasingly recognizing that these kinds of employee skills provide a source of competitive advantage that can lead to substantial gains in quality, productivity, and ultimately, profit (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002; Guthridge, Komm, & Lawson 2008; Hagen, Udeh, & Wilkie 2003; Halfhill & Nielsen 2007; Lawler, Mohrman, & Ledford 1998). Consequently, there is a need for a well-developed pool of managerial talent that is able to effectively apply well-honed

This shortened version of the article is for promotional purposes on publicly accessible databases.

Readers who wish to obtain the full text version of the article can order it via the url

<https://www.neilsonjournals.com/JIBE/abstractjibe17mello.html>

Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson pneilson@neilsonjournals.com

© NeilsonJournals Publishing 2022.

interpersonal skills when working with others, both one-on-one and in groups (Choi, Slaubaugh, & Tian 2021).

This is particularly true in technology and innovation units, where project teams have become a standard and highly effective means of organization structure and design (Ancona & Caldwell 1992; Brown and Eisenhardt 1995; Cooper & Kleinschmidt 1995). Increasingly, however, a single-team project structure is insufficient for the high levels of complexity embedded in new products and services and multiple project teams are often needed to ensure project success (Dietrich, Kujala, & Arto 2013). Employees, hence, may find themselves working on multiple, discrete project teams simultaneously; a work structure common to professional services such as accounting, law, and medicine. Clearly, a work environment in which employees can work together effectively in teams will continue to be of importance in ensuring high levels of performance in organizations (Goltz, Hietapelto, Reinsch, & Tyrell 2008; Halfhill & Nielsen 2007; Lawler, E. E., III, Mohrman, S. A., & Ledford, G. E. Jr. 1998; Nielsen, Sundstrom, & Halfhill 2005).

Not surprisingly, the ability to effectively work as part of a team is one of the skills most sought by employers in potential new hires at the management level (Ashraf 2004; Chen, Donahue, & Klimoski 2004) and one actively sought among new business school graduates (Tarricone & Luca 2002; Thacker & Yost 2002; Tarricone & Luca 2002). One recent survey of employers of college graduates found that an employee's ability to collaborate in a team consistently ranks among the top skills sought by employers in tandem with associated leadership, problem-solving, and communication skills (NACE 2016). An additional survey found that more than 70 percent of employers request that colleges and universities place more emphasis on teamwork and collaboration skills in their curricula (AACU, 2009). Most recently, the Graduate Management Admission Council Corporate Recruiters Survey Report found the top five proficiencies employers seek are oral communication skills, listening skills, written communication skills, presentation skills, and teamwork/adaptability; all skills potentially reinforced by well-designed team project pedagogies (GMAC 2021).

2. Mandate

The employer need for employees who are highly adept at working as part of a team and effectively managing a team has been reinforced by the accreditation standards of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), which explicitly state that general skill areas in business schools should incorporate the ability to work in diverse, team environments in encouraging business schools to offer students challenging projects that require active, collaborative, and experiential learning (AACSB 2020). Similarly, the International Accreditation Council for Business Education (IACBE) mandates

teamwork as one of the key learning outcomes necessary in order to receive accreditation (IACBE 2021). As a result, both accredited and nonaccredited business schools have been redesigning their curricula to support the development of interpersonal and teamwork skills which are essential for their students' career success (Ritter, Small, Mortimer, & Doll 2018) and, at this point in time, virtually every business school has adopted student team projects in their curricula (Jiang, Yang, Guo & Zhang, in press).

3. Pedagogical Benefits

Beyond the needs and demands of employers and requirements of accreditors, team-based learning has been shown to be a highly effective pedagogical strategy in facilitating the delivery of specific learning outcomes (Kolb & Kolb 2005; Loyd, Kern, & Thompson 2005). When placed into groups for class projects, students are expected to engage in active learning (e.g., discussion and problem solving), utilizing each other as sources of knowledge, as opposed to more traditional passive learning methods (e.g., lectures), creating a richer learning environment (Williams, Beard, & Rymer 1991). Project groups have been shown to facilitate the creation of cooperative structures that promote active and higher-level learning or thinking (Hernandez 2002) as well as aid in the development of interpersonal skills, especially with students that have less than five years of work experience (Choi, Slaubaugh & Tian 2021).

A variety of studies have shown that project-based assignments completed in groups facilitates active learning, greater comprehension and retention of information, higher levels of student motivation and achievement, development of critical reasoning skills, and enhanced communication skills (Hansen 2006). It has also been praised as facilitating a high level of content learning as well as retention of content, and enhancing application learning in both quantitative and qualitative contexts (Michaelson, Pamelee, McMahan, & Levin 2008).

Team-based project learning typically requires students to explore new knowledge domains and transform novel experiences in ways in which they are unable to do so individually (Hernandez 2002), especially when projects require students to explore new and current problems and make sense of uncertain and complex situations, such as those typically encountered in contemporary global organizations. Team-based projects have been found to enhance the development and skill and knowledge sets of students relative to real-world problems Fellenz (2006) through both experiential and collaborative learning (Brutus & Donia 2010).

Empirical work has found that team-based projects enhance students' leadership cognition and competence (Chen, Snell, & Wu 2018; Han, Lee, Beyerlein, & Kolb 2018; Mayo, Kakarika, Pastor, & Brutus 2012), teamwork skills (Chen, Donahue, & Klimoski 2004; O'Neill *et al.* 2017), global awareness

and cultural intelligence (Erez, Lisak, Harush, Glikson, Nouri, & Shokef 2013; Taras, *et al.* 2013), problem-solving abilities (Fortner 1999), communication skills (Strom & Strom 1999), and willingness to attempt new and difficult tasks (Kromwey 1995). In addition, students who engage in team-based learning have been found to be better prepared for class (Nieder, Parmelee, Stolfi, & Hudes 2005) and achieve higher performance on learning objectives (Zgheib, Simaan, & Sabra 2010). Team-based learning also allows instructors to teach and more effectively manage larger size classes (Fellenz 2006) as well as better enable “at risk” students (like due to increased social support and/or peer “tutoring”) to successfully complete and stay on track in their course work (Michaelsen, Sweet, & Parmalee 2009).

4. Development of Skills

Team-based learning has been widely cited in facilitating the development and enhancement of the specific skills sought by employers which have been integrated into business school curricula, including content learning, application learning, quantitative and qualitative analytical skills, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal and team skills (Fink 2002; Koles, Stolfi, Borges, Nelson, & Parmelee 2010; Michaelsen, Sweet, & Parmalee 2009; Ofstad, Pharm, & Brunner 2013; Vasan, DeFouw, & Holland 2008; Wiener, Plass, & Marz 2009) and has further been found to have noteworthy positive impact on the development of such skills for students who have limited to no full-time professional work experience (Choi, Slaubaugh, & Tian 2021). Acquisition and even mastery of functional-discipline skills, regardless of discipline, is no longer sufficient for employers. Functional skills need to be complimented by well-developed communication, problem solving, interpersonal, collaboration, time management and teamwork skills to ensure employability.

5. Teaching International Strategic Management

I was recently tasked with teaching a class in International Strategic Management for the first time. While I had been teaching the core capstone strategy course for many years and had also taught international human resource management in the past, this particular course was a new preparation for me. The course title, International Strategic Management, is important. The course is not a course in international *business* but rather international management; hence the need for a focus on management issues and concepts as opposed to broader business. My department also offers the capstone course in strategic management, which I also teach, so it was important to avoid redundancy with content from that course,