

## Leading the way

**Level:** Upper intermediate +

**Time:** 90 minutes +

**Summary:** This lesson is about international projects and the importance of good leadership and teamwork. In this lesson, students:

1. discuss their own preferred style of working and projects they have worked on;
2. study a text on leading international projects;
3. read a case study and discuss their responses to it.

**Materials:** One copy of the worksheet per student

**Group size:** Any

**Note:** This lesson plan is for both pre-experience and in-work business students based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 6/2016.

### Warmer

Students briefly discuss their preferred style of working as well as projects that they have been involved in.

### Key words

The students match the key words with the definitions. Then, they should scan the article to find the words, check their answers and see how the words are used in context. Note that the definitions for the words are given in the order the words appear in the article.

**Key:**

- |                        |                         |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. <i>stakeholders</i> | 7. <i>transparently</i> |
| 2. <i>scope</i>        | 8. <i>sponsor</i>       |
| 3. <i>approaches</i>   | 9. <i>protocols</i>     |
| 4. <i>advocate</i>     | 10. <i>paradox</i>      |
| 5. <i>resilience</i>   | 11. <i>fuzzy</i>        |
| 6. <i>sensitivity</i>  | 12. <i>appraisals</i>   |

### Collocations

Students join the words to make collocations from the article, then use them to complete the sentences about the article.

**Key:**

- a.**
- |             |              |
|-------------|--------------|
| 1. <i>c</i> | 6. <i>e</i>  |
| 2. <i>e</i> | 7. <i>d</i>  |
| 3. <i>b</i> | 8. <i>a</i>  |
| 4. <i>a</i> | 9. <i>b</i>  |
| 5. <i>d</i> | 10. <i>c</i> |
- b.**
- |                                      |                                 |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. <i>strategic change</i>           | 6. <i>timely manner</i>         |
| 2. <i>cross-border collaboration</i> | 7. <i>virtual communication</i> |
| 3. <i>work stream</i>                | 8. <i>response times</i>        |
| 4. <i>negotiation skills</i>         | 9. <i>language barrier</i>      |
| 5. <i>people development</i>         | 10. <i>balancing act</i>        |

### Expressions

Students find expressions in the article that match the meanings, then use them in sentences of their own, preferably about working on international projects.

**Key:**

- |                               |                         |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. <i>at the very least</i>   | 3. <i>as you go</i>     |
| 2. <i>jump to conclusions</i> | 4. <i>lose sight of</i> |

### Discussion

Students discuss the questions in groups, then provide feedback to the whole class.

### Case study

Students read the case study, then discuss their answers to the questions in small groups. Get feedback from each group. Discuss their opinions, what advice they might give Gudrun and whether they have ever encountered a situation like this.

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The author of the article, Bob Dignen, offers this feedback:

The following comments are provided as food for thought. Different interpretations are, of course, possible.

### **What do you think about Gudrun's reaction to Paul's email?**

Gudrun's reaction is typical of someone who reads an email too quickly and immediately reacts negatively. She sees criticism without really trying to understand Paul's motivation. She interprets his request for information as a lack of confidence in her ability to finish on time, when there are many other possible reasons for such a request. She also interprets Paul's "surprise" about the success of the Munich event as meaning he doesn't believe in her abilities, when his surprise may have nothing to do with her. Fast and negative readings of emails are common in international projects and can lead to inefficient communication and dangerous conflicts between team members.

### **How successful is Anita in helping Gudrun to understand and deal with the email?**

Anita provides a sympathetic ear for Gudrun and reacts with empathy. We don't know the history of the relationship between Paul and Gudrun, and Anita may be providing important emotional support in relation to a repeated situation. But Anita's sympathy could be dangerous in many ways. Instead, she could have challenged Gudrun's interpretation of the email by saying, "Are you sure Paul meant that? Perhaps he's just ..." And she could have encouraged Gudrun to communicate with Paul to clear up any potential misunderstandings. For example, she could have asked Gudrun, "Why don't you give Paul a quick call to clarify ... ?"

### **What advice would you give to Paul about writing emails as a project leader in order to avoid such reactions?**

Interpreting Paul's email positively, he wants to do two valid things. Firstly, he is checking on the status of a task that he gave to Gudrun. This is clearly important to him, as he asks for an update on the same day. Monitoring and managing task performance by email is a standard requirement of an international project leader. Secondly, Paul also wants to express positive feedback to Gudrun on her handling of the Munich workshop and offers her the job the following year. The intention is to express trust in her ability to handle a future task. Looking at Paul's email in this way, we have a project leader who is demonstrating good practice.

On the other hand, Paul could have anticipated that Gudrun might read the email negatively. And he could have been more explicit about his confidence in Gudrun to complete the task on time. For example: "I'm sure you are on track with this." If there was an external reason for him asking Gudrun, he could have mentioned this: "I was asked by my senior manager to confirm when the documentation will be ready so that's why I'm emailing you."

Regarding his feedback on the event in Munich, Paul could have explained his thinking more clearly and positively: "I'm surprised by how well the event went because many of the participants we invited had said they had no time and didn't want to come. But your organization obviously convinced them."

Leaders often possess more information about a project than their team members and they need to give enough background information to enable others to fully understand the situation.

## Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all of the new and useful vocabulary they have learnt during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

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### 1 Warmer

Do you prefer to work alone or as part of a team?

What has been the biggest or longest project you have ever worked on?

### 2 Key words

Match the key words to the definitions below. Then, find them in the article to read them in context.

advocate	appraisals	approaches	fuzzy
paradox	protocols	resilience	scope
sensitivity	sponsor	stakeholders	transparently

- 1. people who have an interest in the success of a project \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. the things that a particular project deals with \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. particular ways of thinking about or dealing with something \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. publicly support a particular policy or way of doing things \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. the ability to be strong again after a problem \_\_\_\_\_
- 6. a quality that shows that you care about something and do not want to cause offence \_\_\_\_\_
- 7. acting in a way that everyone knows what you are doing and how you are doing it \_\_\_\_\_
- 8. a person or group that organizes and supports a project \_\_\_\_\_
- 9. sets of rules for the correct way to behave \_\_\_\_\_
- 10. a situation that is strange because it has features or qualities that do not normally exist together \_\_\_\_\_
- 11. not explained clearly \_\_\_\_\_
- 12. interviews between a manager and an employee, which allow the manager to judge how well the employee is doing their job \_\_\_\_\_

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Bob Dignen

**International projects place high demands upon their project leaders, who need to make professional decisions as well as ensure the integration of each individual team member.**

- 1** International projects play a key role in large organizations and are often a mechanism for driving strategic change. But projects are also important to individuals, providing opportunities to gain new experience and develop a career as a future leader. International projects are often challenging, however. They demand cross-border collaboration, which may not be supported by the organizations involved. Budgets and time may be limited. Project members may not have the necessary skills, including language skills. And different stakeholders may even define the project differently.

For those leading international projects, the responsibility for success and the risks of failure are often enormous. So what are the key success factors?

#### **2 Plan flexibly**

Very few international projects succeed according to their own criteria. Most finish late, over budget and with a hugely expanded scope. This might look like a failure of leadership. Yet, if better results are achieved – even if they cost more and take longer – can this really be considered a failure?

Traditionally, detailed and structured planning processes were seen as being synonymous with what projects were all about. But as the complexity and scale of international projects grew, planning that was too detailed became problematic in the face of changing business situations and

unforeseen problems. Today, more flexible, “agile” approaches are popular, including, for example, regular weekly meetings.

The key is to plan flexibly. We need to know what our goal is, how we intend to get there and what resources we think we require to do so. But we must also accept that more resources may be needed, quality targets may have to be redefined and even the goals themselves may need to be changed.

Leaders must know when to defend the existing plan and when to advocate for change, which may not be popular with senior management. This requires analytical excellence and good organizational skills, the resilience to stick to the plan when it is under attack, and openness and negotiation skills when the plan has to be changed.

#### **Staff well and develop people**

Although projects are often highly technical and data-based, they are fundamentally about people. Staffing the team with people who have the appropriate technical, language and collaboration skills is therefore a key success factor.

The solution might seem simple – to create profiles for team members and recruit according to those profiles. Often, however, project teams are populated not by the right people but simply by those who are available. International project leaders frequently receive nominated team members from local organizations and simply have to work with them.

Project leaders should therefore always dedicate time to people development: training, coaching and mentoring project members. But this is

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often overlooked, with zero budget allocated to the personal development of the project team and no time dedicated to training. As a result, people and their projects underperform.

One problem is that project leaders are often not the best people developers. They tend to be highly demanding and results-orientated individuals. One solution is to assign people development to a work stream in the project or, at the very least, to an individual with learning and development (L&D) skills and motivation.

#### 4 Manage communication

Projects involve the coordinated activity of large numbers of people exchanging information in a clear and timely manner. This requires excellent communication skills, with people listening and speaking effectively, writing clear texts, reading texts sensitively, acting upon information intelligently and storing information transparently. Those who lead international projects need to master four main dimensions of communication:

- **Internal**

This involves defining roles and responsibilities, motivating people to produce high levels of performance, building relationships, creating a sense of team and being clear about the priorities and purpose of the project.

- **External**

This involves focusing on the various stakeholders outside the team whose support is needed for project success – including the sponsor, senior management and those affected by the project's outcomes. All these people need to feel a sense of involvement in the project. This means

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that you need to inform them regularly and ask them to contribute to the project.

- **Virtual**

Virtual communication is an important part of international projects. The key task of project leaders is to discuss and define protocols for virtual communication: when is it to be used, for which purposes, what are the expected response times, etc?

- **English**

Cross-border communication often uses English as a lingua franca. For some people, this is a language barrier and project leaders need to manage this challenge. This could involve using visuals more intensively in meetings, using translation services for key documentation and simply giving non-native speakers more time to express their views fully and to clarify what others are saying. More generally, team members should be encouraged not to jump to conclusions about what others mean but always to clarify.

#### Balance and decide

International project leadership is a curious balancing act. On the one hand, it requires individuals to provide what is commonly seen as leadership: decisive direction and decision-making. On the other hand, it involves the ability to provide another dimension of what is also defined as good leadership: a coaching process that stimulates independent thinking by individuals and the sharing of responsibility within the group.

Managing this paradox, and knowing when to use which approach with which people, is one of the arts of international

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leadership. Doing it well comes partly from experience but it also depends on understanding each specific situation.

An additional challenge is that many project leaders assume that terms such as “decision”, “team” and “leader” are understood in the same way by everybody. Yet this is rarely the case, which often leads to misunderstandings or conflicts. For some people, a decision involves a slow, collective process. For others, a decision should be fast and individual. For some, the concept of team means clear structure, roles and decision-making authority. For others, a team is a fuzzy, collaborative activity, involving shared tasks and decisions. For some, a leader is the visible and decisive director of team decisions. For others, the leader is the invisible enabler of team decisions.

There is no single correct way for teams to be and to perform well. What leaders do need to do is make sure there is a consensus within the team on its decision-making processes. This may involve a detailed discussion. It may require rules.

#### 6 Learn as you go

Project leaders are very unlikely to get everything right in the early stages of a project. One key to effective leadership is the ability to adopt a learning process as the project progresses. Learning as you go can involve formal “health check” meetings involving the sponsor and other key stakeholders. It can also mean regular, less formal feedback processes within the team. Key questions to ask are:

- to what extent are we doing the right things?
- to what extent are we doing the right things in the right way?
- how can we improve our way of working?

Regular appraisals and feedback sessions between team members as well as between the leader and team members can inspire a positive learning culture that drives higher performance.

#### Conclusion

Successful international project leadership requires a number of factors beginning with “p”:

- a clear purpose;
- the right people;
- flexible planning;
- communication protocols;
- feedback processes.

And despite all the challenges of international projects, don’t lose sight of the opportunities they provide: for cross-cultural and technical insights, for developing people-management skills, for career development, etc.

Organizations are becoming increasingly project-orientated. The big question to ask yourself is whether you are, too.

**BOB DIGNEN** is a director of York Associates ([www.york-associates.co.uk](http://www.york-associates.co.uk)) and author of many business English books.

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### 3 Collocations

a. Match the words to make collocations from the article. Then, use the collocations to complete the sentences.

- |                 |                  |
|-----------------|------------------|
| 1. cross-border | a. change        |
| 2. negotiation  | b. development   |
| 3. people       | c. collaboration |
| 4. strategic    | d. stream        |
| 5. work         | e. skills        |
| 6. balancing    | a. times         |
| 7. language     | b. manner        |
| 8. response     | c. communication |
| 9. timely       | d. barrier       |
| 10. virtual     | e. act           |

b. Complete with collocations 1 to 5.

- International projects often provide a way for organizations to implement \_\_\_\_\_.
- When people from different countries work on a project together, \_\_\_\_\_ is necessary.
- The task of developing people can be assigned to a \_\_\_\_\_ or to someone with good learning and development skills.
- Project leaders need to have good \_\_\_\_\_.
- They should also dedicate time to \_\_\_\_\_.

c. Complete with collocations 6 to 10.

- International project team members need good communication skills so that they can exchange information in a clear and \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_\_\_ is an important part of international projects as it is unlikely everyone will be able to meet face-to-face.
- Deciding what the expected \_\_\_\_\_ are to emails etc is an important aspect of communication management.
- For some people, English may present a \_\_\_\_\_ that project leaders need to overcome.
- International project leadership can be a \_\_\_\_\_ between decisive direction and decision-making, and a coaching process that stimulates independent thinking.

### 4 Expressions

Find the following expressions in the article. Then, use them in sentences of your own.

- a four-word expression meaning *even if nothing else is done* (section 3)
- a three-word expression meaning *make a decision too quickly without knowing all the facts* (section 4)
- a three-word expression meaning *during a process, not before* (section 6)
- a three-word expression meaning *forget an important fact, or to forget what your main aim is, because you are thinking too much about other things* (section 7)

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### 5 Discussion

Talk about a project you have worked on.

- Which nationalities, companies, departments were involved in the project?
- How would you describe the cooperation between the project members?
- Did the project leaders provide you with adequate guidance?
- What would you do differently in the future?

### 6 Case study

Read the case study, then discuss the questions.

- *What do you think about Gudrun's reaction to Paul's email?*
- *How successful is Anita in helping Gudrun to understand and deal with the email?*
- *What advice would you give Paul about writing emails as a project leader in order to avoid such reactions?*

#### Case study: Leadership and trust

Gudrun works in Hamburg in the project management office of a global firm. The team is looking to roll out a new learning management system (LMS) for the human resources department. She is unhappy with the email from her project leader in the UK.

Hi Gudrun

I just wanted to see how you are getting on with the project documentation that we discussed at the meeting two weeks ago. I haven't heard anything from you so I wondered if it was finished yet. Can you let me know by the end of today?

Oh and good job on the workshop organization in Munich. It was a great success. I was really surprised how well it went. I think it may be your job for Barcelona next year.

Best wishes  
Paul

Gudrun talks to her Spanish colleague Anita about the email.

**Gudrun:** I can't believe this email from Paul. Look at it. First, he's controlling me, checking up whether I have done the work or not. Doesn't he believe I'm going to do it on time? I haven't contacted him because I've been so busy completing the documentation. And now he's pushing me to finish it today. It's not fair.

**Anita:** Really? That's not fair!

**Gudrun:** No. And then he's surprised by the Munich workshop, as if he thinks I would mess up. I'm really not sure I want to work for him. He's so rude at times.

**Anita:** Look, forget it. The project will be over in six months and you will never see him again.



## Leading the way

### Vocabulary record: Leading the way...

verb	noun	adjective (+ opposite)	adverb (+ opposite)
develop			
	resilience		
		excellent	
			sensitively

Vocabulary record

