

17

A Tough Day for a French Expatriate in Vietnam: The Management of a Large International Infrastructure Project

Sylvie Chevrier

1 Possible answers

1.1 What cultural framework may help to understand the behaviour of Le Thi Thai during the meeting with the governmental authorities?

In the Vietnamese context, as well as in most emerging economies, professional life and social life are not separate worlds. People are embedded in a complex network of social relationships which define their range of appropriate interactions. The most obvious obligation relates to respect for age and hierarchical status. The complex Vietnamese forms of address meaning, for instance, uncle, aunt, elder brother or sister, younger brother or sister, are used according to age and social status. Contradicting people of higher status would be rude and socially unacceptable.

The director that hosted the meeting was typically a person of high status and older than Thai. For these reasons, Thai could not speak her mind and had to comply with his request for additional surveys. The case also shows that she does not necessarily intend to do this extra work but she looks for a better understanding of the situation through the indirect interventions of her acquaintances in governmental institutions. Even with Bruno she avoids direct conflict and lets him yell until he has finished, rather than interrupting him to justify her behaviour.

Bruno cannot understand her “betrayal” since what is most important for him is to be faithful to one’s idea and to advocate it. He puts more emphasis on ideas than on social relationships and dares to face conflict when needed. The point is to argue to convince others with sound arguments and reasoning. To give up one’s convictions in front of more powerful people is a sign of weakness. This evokes the fundamental French fears identified by d’Iribarne (2012: 109): “being forced to kowtow, through fear or interest, to someone with the power either to harm you or shower you with favour”.

We can conclude from these world views that the interaction between the French and the Vietnamese might raise misperceptions: through French eyes, Vietnamese people giving up their convictions to comply with authorities appears as hypocrisy or even cowardliness; through Vietnamese eyes, the French insistence on debate appears as aggressive and rude stubbornness and inflexibility. On the one side ideas are confronted; on the other side, they are combined.

	Bruno	Thai
Objective	Convincing the other person of one’s view	Reaching one’s goal in the long term
Means	Consistent technical arguments, proofs	Understanding the other person’s rationale
Communication style	Open discussion Debating contest	Indirect and implicit communication Conflict avoidance
What is most valued	Ideas, scientific truth	Relationship
Conclusion	Partners are committed to final written agreements	Written agreements may be challenged if the context changes

Table 1. Compared views of negotiation

1.2 What hypothesis can be formulated to explain the unexpected resignation of Nguyen Minh Anh just before his interview with Bruno?

Nguyen Minh Anh was considered by the French director as a promising young engineer and Bruno could not imagine that he was thinking of resigning. If we listen carefully to Le Thi Thai, we may imagine that the forthcoming individual interview was the trigger for his decision.

We can suggest the comparative interpretation of both actors about the individual interview.

Bruno's perspective on individual interviews	Anh's perspective on his upcoming interview
Open discussion to get to know each team member better	Hierarchical relationship in which he will not be able to talk openly
Evaluating the progress and detecting problems in the project	Bruno will certainly reproach him with the technical problem which he has not been able to solve by himself and which delayed the project
Giving encouraging feedback to create a trusting atmosphere	Bruno was so upset about his hiding of the problem that he may sanction him
Adjusting the initial mission to the evolution of the project and skills	Anh was afraid of being stigmatized while he worked so hard with his Vietnamese colleagues to solve the problem. His efforts have been ignored
Defining tasks and deadlines	Bruno would probably remove some tasks from Anh with which he can no longer be trusted
Identifying the skills to be improved	Anh has incidentally asked Francis for a training session but Francis did not bother about his request; he forgot to talk about it to Bruno

Table 2. Comparative interpretation of both actors

Despite Bruno's best intentions, Anh probably left before his first individual interview to avoid losing face.

For Bruno, the interview was not threatening since it was the opportunity to get to know each other better and to take stock of the situation from both points of view. It was a means to create a closer relationship and to follow up on activities more closely. He always acted in a friendly manner with the local staff. For him, it was clear that the first purpose was to listen to what Anh had to say and ask. The hierarchical situation did not prevent a frank and open discussion on all relevant topics in order to improve project management. Bruno likes to debate about the best technical solutions and he is ready to be challenged on these topics by skilled young engineers.

He did not perceive how insecure the local engineers were in this foreign organizational culture. As we have previously seen with respect to Thai, the social positions of the actors determine what can be said or not and the interview with their boss can hardly be an open discussion. They would not contradict him or discuss the goals even if they felt they were not realistic.

When the boss appears to say something wrong, the Vietnamese employees do not dare to say so. They have to find a back door or a third person to get the message across. Informal situations are used to allude to important things in a less explicit form. That is how Thai proceeds when she wants Bruno to do without the individual interviews; she just suggests postponing the implementation without openly disagreeing with him.

Individual interviews as they have been developed in the Western world imply a fair discussion between the manager and the employee. However, when exported all over the world by multinational companies, this implicit prerequisite is far from being fulfilled.

1.3 To what extent are Bruno and Thai complementary? What are their respective roles and strengths in the management of the project? How could their complementarity be enhanced?

Bruno	Thai
Technical expertise in transportation systems	Technical expertise in transportation in Vietnam
Respected international expert	Knowledge of the local context
Not part of local social networks	Embedded in local social networks
Relationship with Ingenirik head office	Relational network at Ministry of Transportation and local authorities
Languages: English and French	Languages: Vietnamese, French, English
Close contact with expatriates	Close contact with the local engineers

Table 3. Complementarity

The complementarity of the two co-directors of the project relates both to their expertise and their social integration.

Complementary expertise

Bruno benefits from the reputation of a well-known international firm which can draw on many years of successful experience. This international technical expertise is highly valued in Vietnam both by authorities and young qualified people that may be recruited. They are often eager to join foreign companies to learn new technical skills and “modern management”, in contrast to the traditional management practices of public bureaucracies and state-owned companies. As this expertise is highly valued, the local personnel expect their foreign managers to train them and transfer knowledge in day-to-day supporting relationships. At the individual level, Bruno has proven to be a good problem solver for technical issues. Before becoming a project manager, he worked as an engineer and has good field experience.

Thai is also quite knowledgeable about technical issues in the transportation industry. She brings additional knowledge of local constraints and the specific context that have to be taken into account. She is also aware of the role of the different levels of authorities and is familiar with technical and political decision-making channels and processes. Her specific knowledge may lead the project towards more realistic options.

As both directors have a fairly good shared technical understanding, they are able to discuss issues thoroughly with a common language and to find satisfactory solutions.

One foot in, one foot out

The most important complementarity concerns their social integration. Bruno comes from head office and can benefit from the expertise of colleagues, and resources such as managerial tools (individual interview grids) from headquarters. He also has a close relationship with French expatriates because when they first arrived in Hanoi, he helped them to settle into the city and guided them in their first social activities beside work. Information flows easily among them and that is how he learnt about the tricky technical problem as soon as Francis discovered it.

However, Bruno is not integrated into Vietnamese social networks. As a foreigner he is not involved in the informal social ties that link people in the society. He is excluded from all discussions in Vietnamese. Without personal contacts, it is difficult for him to get an appointment quickly with the right person.

But he can speak freely during meetings and promote the project or recall objective facts even if they might contradict what the authorities would appreciate. His presence helps Ingenirik convey messages that the Vietnamese counterparts would not dare to put across. His outsider's point of view brings some objectivity into the discussion, but reciprocally, complex power games remain hidden to him.

In contrast, Thai is very much involved in local social networks. This allowed her to obtain an appointment with the Ministry senior official when Bruno did not manage to do so. She also attends institutional meetings where no foreigner is admitted. She may call acquaintances in official agencies to learn more about a complex issue. She can influence through a third party the opinion of some of those involved. She has access to decision makers and may meet them for informal discussion outside work. She may also draw upon her international experience of the company to support some decisions "made by the French".

Thai is comfortable with the Vietnamese indirect and continuous negotiating process. She suggests seeing the supplier and discussing prices with him again. However, caught up in social obligations, she may not speak up and contradict high authorities and/or those older than herself in meetings. While Bruno feels free to speak, she does not. Inside the company, she understands the Vietnamese colleagues but does not openly tell the French expatriates what she knows. She wishes to ensure team cohesion and does not report problems.

Eventually, the complementarity of both project directors partly accounts for the project's success. Thai should use social networks whenever needed to get in touch with the right person, to be kept posted of decisions and changes of partners, and to get access to authorities.

Bruno can capitalize on the international prestige of the company to make technical solutions acceptable, and can make the most of his presence as a foreigner in meetings to insist on the objectivity and rigour of technical decisions regardless of subtle power and social games among participants. The dual project management has one foot in and one foot out of the two cultures involved, benefiting from both positions.

2 References

d'Iribarne, P. (2012). *Managing Corporate Values in Diverse National Cultures. The Challenge of Differences*. London: Routledge.

3 Further reading for the lecturer

Chanlat, J. F., Davel, E. & Dupuis, J. P. (2013). *Cross-Cultural Management. Culture and Management Across the World*. London: Routledge.

Chevrier, S. & Viegas Pires, M. (2013). "Delegating effectively across cultures". In: *Journal of World Business*, 48:3, 431–439.

d'Iribarne, P. & Henry, A. (2007). *Successful Companies in the Developing World, Managing in Synergy with Cultures, Notes and Documents*, Agence Française de Développement, 36.

McFarlin, D. & Sweeney, P. (2013). *International Organizational Behavior. Transcending Borders and Cultures*. New York: Routledge.

Quang T. & Nguyen T. V. (2002). "Management styles and organisational effectiveness in Vietnam". In: *Research and Practice in Human Resource Management*, 10:2, 36–55.