

CASE STUDY

BY DAVE EATON



FLYING THROUGH

*ON A FLIGHT FROM
SINGAPORE BACK TO
LOS ANGELES, ONE LEADER'S
FAILING PROJECT REVEALS
THAT WHEN DIFFERENT
CULTURES CROSS PATHS,
AGILITY IS KEY.*

CULTURAL TURBULENCE

As Gabriella Venucci settled into her business-class seat departing Changi Airport in Singapore, she thought about the challenging week she had just completed. She had assembled her global project team in the Southeast Asian capital to get back on track after a difficult first month in her role leading this new joint venture. The flight attendant handed her a warm towel to wash off the travel grime, while another thanked her for selecting Singapore Airlines and handed her a gift and a vanity kit. “I wish I could wash off the bad feelings I have about where this project stands. Gabriella thought. She tried to figure out what she was going to say to her boss Monday morning at her firm’s offices in Los Angeles.

Gabriella, whose background was in engineering from her native Italy, gazed out the window, thinking about the players on her team: Gustavo Olan, Bolivian-born, leading the engineering function; Sophia Chen, born in China and raised and educated in Singapore, leading communications; Sophia Stengaart, a native of Germany, heading up marketing; James Smith, from the U.K., director of finance; and finally Ganesh Gupta, from India, leading the operations and information technology functions. On paper, this team, on assignment in the U.S. for the past 18 months at this cutting-edge robotics company, should have been amazing.

The joint-venture partner from Malaysia had promised the moon and the stars, having committed to building

a manufacturing facility on a greenfield site outside of Kuala Lumpur in the new tech center. The plan would feature state-of-the-art technology, including newly patented robotics from Gabriella's company. So why were they off to such a bad start?

The flight attendants began their service as the captain announced they had ascended to 38,000 feet. Gabriella was amazed at how smoothly this Singapore Air team worked, flowing from passenger to passenger, sharing tasks in some prearranged sequence, without a spoken word required. Her team certainly didn't run like this well-oiled machine.

While she considered the "why" behind the cabin crew's performance, Gabriella recalled the challenges facing her team:

WHAT WAS KEEPING THE TEAM'S PROJECT FROM REALLY SOARING?

Meetings were difficult.

Some members were blunt and challenged every point she or others made, while others seemed to shrink into the background. She wished she had more tools to draw the shyer ones out and at the same time curb the more-aggressive members who seemed to dominate.

Toward the end of the week of team meetings, she became so frustrated that she let her emotions get the best of her and stormed out. The group stared in disbelief at one another, not sure of their next move. When she returned, she was obviously angry and demanded that each participant come up with a list of missteps they would "own" and a step-by-step plan to regroup and move forward.

Some team members came fully prepared with notes and were able to represent the input from their subteams, while others arrived seemingly clueless, appearing to wander from topic to topic.

When her team met with their joint-venture partner,

the more she pushed for information, the more they changed the subject or avoided eye contact. If she asked for commitments to get the project timeline back on track, they made excuses about how their company was unable to commit.

She asked why the team was behind schedule in building the manufacturing facility with their joint-venture partner, only to receive vague answers. In other cases, key members seemed to yield to her, awaiting direction and reticent to offer their opinions.

The sluggish progress threatened to doom the project. At the present pace, the facility might open six months behind schedule. Opportunity costs would equal more than \$80 million due to cost overruns and loss of income. What was once considered a dream project for the company had become a nightmare.



**"SHE HAD DONE ALMOST
NOTHING TO BUILD
A HIGH-PERFORMANCE
INTERDEPENDENT TEAM
THAT WAS ABLE AND
WILLING TO RISE ABOVE
SELF-PROMOTION..."**

As Gabriella passed her dinner tray back to the flight attendant while another crew member served her coffee, she couldn't help but wonder what enabled the Singapore Air team to work so well together and what she could learn from it.

As the lights went out and the airplane went into night mode, she stared out at the orange and red hues of a beautiful sunset and searched for answers. She remembered a course she took in college about intercultural management, the study of cultural dimensions and how people from different backgrounds often act differently based on their upbringings.

Like a sequence of six-second Vine videos in her brain, she recalled images her professor had chalked on

the board in that musty classroom in Cambridge:

In some cultures, individuals are encouraged to yield to status and hierarchy with no expectation of being treated equally without regard to money, title, age or gender.

Certain cultures encourage students to speak their minds and be prepared every morning in class to represent both sides of an argument. They are graded heavily for their debating or argumentative skills. Other cultures are expected to revere their elders and not challenge the status quo or the views of their parents, teachers or superiors.

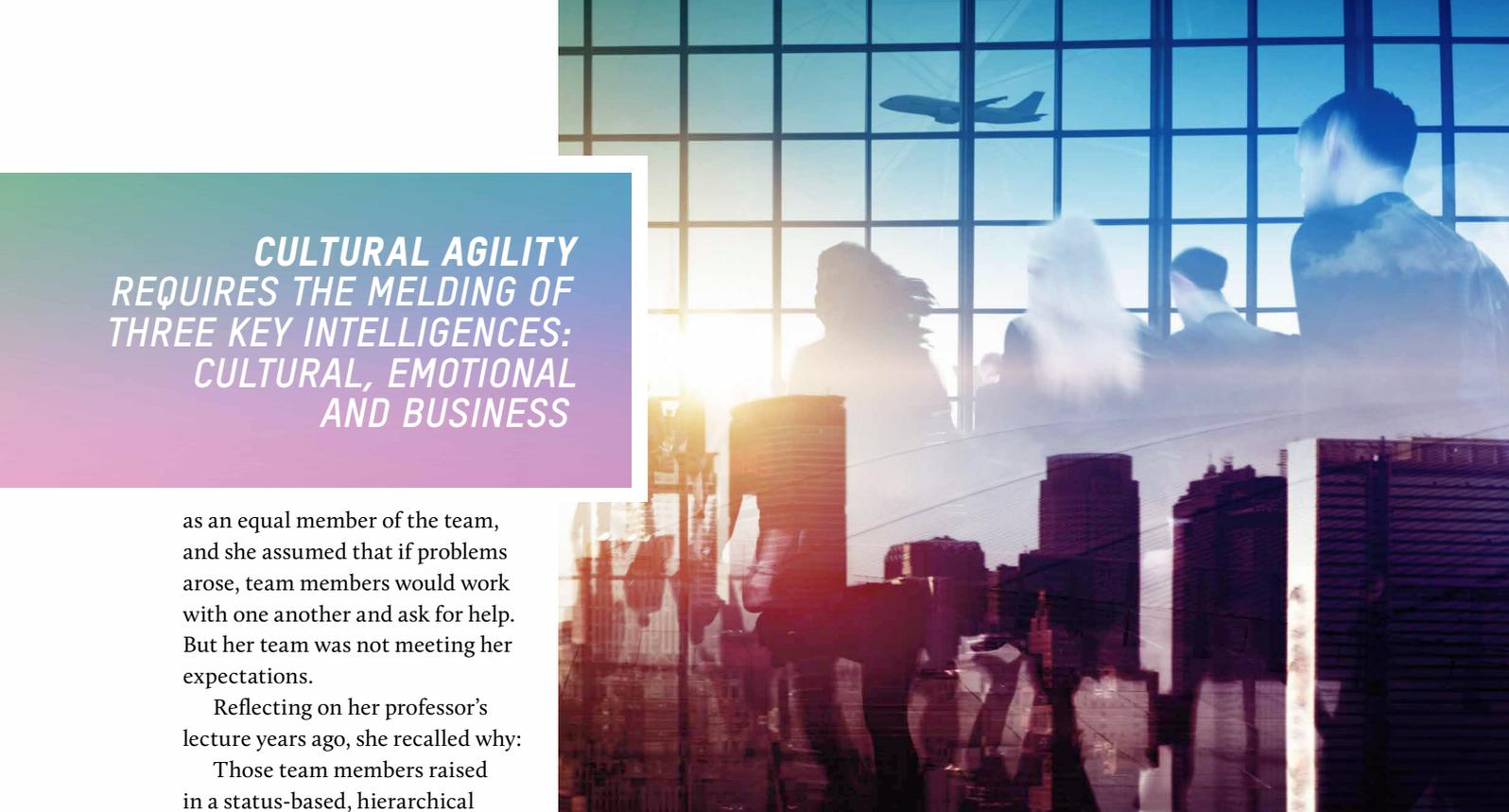
Her professor drew chalkboard illustrations to explain these dichotomies, imploring students to use them to open a dialogue, to seek the "why" behind the behavior they were

observing and learn to build bridges between stylistic differences.

As she began to grow weary and give in to the dark side of fatigue and stress from a difficult week, Gabriella felt a positive emotion run through her body; she may have happened upon the ingredients of a new plan.

She awoke some eight hours later with newfound energy, partly due to the captain announcing they were beginning their descent into Los Angeles. More importantly, a plan began to form in her mind. Gabriella quickly pulled out a pad of paper and her favorite pen and began to sketch out her path forward.

She realized she had been expecting her teammates to know what she wanted, to step up and show initiative and voice their concerns. She wanted them to treat her



CULTURAL AGILITY REQUIRES THE MELDING OF THREE KEY INTELLIGENCES: CULTURAL, EMOTIONAL AND BUSINESS

as an equal member of the team, and she assumed that if problems arose, team members would work with one another and ask for help. But her team was not meeting her expectations.

Reflecting on her professor's lecture years ago, she recalled why:

Those team members raised in a status-based, hierarchical culture may not feel comfortable challenging their leadership, let alone sound the alarm when work is behind schedule. This is due to reverence, respect and desire to maintain group harmony.

If students are graded in school for their sparring and debating skills, they are likely to become adept at arguing—and expect others to defend their points. But that is not likely to happen if other team members shy away from conflict and candid speech to preserve relationships and save face.

While she was able to share her emotions, perhaps believing it made her “human,” others on the team may have lost respect for her perceived inability to maintain control.

And—unlike the flight attendants who seemed to operate as a finely tuned Cirque de Soleil cast, measured and rewarded for overall team effectiveness and customer satisfaction—she had done almost nothing to build a high-performance interdependent team that was able and willing to rise above self-promotion and put the collective group ahead of their individual needs.

The plane descended to make its final approach and Gabriella decided her first move was to engage the team in co-creating the solution path, under her direction. She would gather the team on BlueJeans or TelePresence as early as the middle of the next week and share her vision for the next three months, ensuring alignment around goals and objectives for this joint venture. She would assign tasks to each functional leader, to be sure accountability and deliverables were clear.

She pulled out her notebook and detailed the game plan, which she would discuss with her boss back in the office on Monday.

The first step would be to do a “styles inventory” of each member of this team, to begin to leverage diversity of thought, background and experience to their benefit.

She would then roll up these individual profiles into a “team profile” and seek an outside consultant to facilitate a session to increase team members' awareness and understanding.

This team-building workshop would be designed to:

- *Recognize where team members are similar and where they're different along those dimensions her professor had illustrated.*
- *Gauge which “differences make a difference” in their work going forward (for example, communications styles: direct versus indirect; decision making processes: autocratic versus consensus).*
- *Use the team profile to build a “team culture” with guidelines or principles to steer their work.*
- *Practice leveraging these new “human operating systems” on real-time deliverables that her team had to address.*

Gabriella also knew that she needed to examine her own leadership styles and work hard to get better at creating an inclusive climate for individual and team participation.



She would hire a coach to help her develop a leadership style that creates an environment of trust, collaboration and seamless contribution.

In the end, she would get more discretionary effort from team members, leverage their individual strengths to the overall team's benefit and develop a culture of innovation that would no doubt produce superior results.

She also knew best-laid plans go only so far, so she had to work with her team to improve support mechanisms to better ensure sustainability, well beyond the hype and high of a team-building session.

This meant baking the new team culture into rewards and talent recognition systems, performance management needed to track and hold participants accountable for these new behaviors, even the success profiles and competency models needed to reflect the “new normal” to ensure that the change sticks.

As the plane began to land, a calm came across Gabriella's body as she envisioned the Monday meeting with her boss. On the surface, he would appear frustrated with the lack of an immediate turnaround, but she felt confident she could convince him that this trip was for data gathering and damage assessment, and that she had gauged the capacity of her team (which was quite positive, she realized) and would continue to build higher levels of trust with them. The goals had been partially met; she also was smarter knowing this could take longer in a multinational team.

Gabriella also used the trip to assess the joint-venture partner, what it could or could not influence and control, and how to factor the realities of working with a cross-border partner into her “next steps” plan. In the short term it would cost more to “right the ship,” but in the long term, it was “short money” to build the right infra-

structure (better done in advance next time, admittedly) and set the project up for success for many years to come.

A few minutes after the jet pulled up to the gate, Gabriella walked out of the terminal and got into her Jeep Cherokee. She was still a bit daunted by the thought of meeting her boss in three days, but she felt equally assured that she could express her new plan to him in a way that would retain his confidence in her as the lead.

As she drove home, Gabriella felt her approach was becoming more

“THE FIRST STEP WOULD BE TO DO A 'STYLES INVENTORY' OF EACH MEMBER OF THIS TEAM, TO BEGIN TO LEVERAGE DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT, BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE TO THEIR BENEFIT.”

Gabriella's predicament is not unique.

In our work on global projects and with global teams, we often find executives and other senior leaders underestimating the importance of building a team culture before they start their work. In the absence of a common culture, workers revert to the culture they know. As that happens, they become in some ways blind to the

limitations they are creating.

In this context, cultures represent styles. It is critical to form operating guidelines that are mutually agreed upon, to ensure team members are adopting a common set of behaviors for key areas including decision making, communications, meeting management and time orientation. Gabriella needs to recalibrate with her team around these issues and realign ex-

pectations for what is acceptable behavior. She needs to get her project back on track by running a series of meetings, making decisions on critical changes with the joint-venture partner and setting a project plan in place.

By defining the rules and coordinating each team member's approach to those rules, team members and team leaders develop a joint understanding of what to do and what to avoid.

definable. After all, the aim of any team is to work as smoothly, quickly and gracefully as the Singapore Airlines team that just flew Gabriella halfway around the world without spilling a drop of coffee or leaving any passenger dissatisfied. Achieving that kind of result for her team would become Gabriella's goal. And, if she could describe, define and convince her teammates of the same thing, her trip would have been one of the wisest investments her company could have made. //