Turning International Engineering Complexity into Shared Success: Emotional leadership, quality by design and global coordination [1]

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Abstract

International engineering projects create exceptional opportunities to combine knowledge, capabilities and perspectives across borders. At the same time, they require project leaders to align multicultural teams, diverse regulatory environments, distributed supply chains and decisions made across locations and time zones.

Drawing on my experience in international projects, this article presents three complementary foundations for turning that complexity into shared success: emotional leadership and intercultural communication; quality by design and international governance; and global coordination supported by technology and objective information.

Real cases illustrate how trust, common standards and shared visibility can strengthen decision-making, technical consistency and collaboration throughout the project life cycle.

Introduction

Engineering projects are increasingly international. A project may be developed by teams located in several countries, delivered through local and global partners, financed by multilateral institutions, and executed under technical and regulatory requirements that differ from those of the parent organization. This environment creates growth and learning opportunities, but it also asks project leaders to adapt and work differently.

In my experience, the answer is not to manage each location as an isolated unit. It is to create a shared operating environment in which people can trust one another, understand the expected result and make decisions using reliable information.

I have found three foundations particularly valuable. They are interconnected: leadership creates trust, quality and governance create consistency, and coordination and

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technology create visibility. Together, they help international teams act as one project, no matter where they are located.

1. Emotional leadership and intercultural communication

International projects are, above all, people working with people.

Team members may interpret hierarchy, urgency, disagreement or accountability differently. Effective leadership therefore starts with curiosity and adaptation. I try to understand first how colleagues communicate, what they need in order to decide confidently, and which local relationships can help the project move forward.

A practical case involved the development of a new process that had to be deployed in China while I was leading from Spain. Physical presence was not the key factor. I already knew a local manager and several trusted professionals from an earlier project. These relationships allowed me to rely on a trusted network, build confidence with the assigned local focal point, and establish a clear, shared roadmap for the project.

The local team did not need to wait for every answer from headquarters. A defined scope, an approved timeline, as well as known and shared rules allowed the team to act with agility and make sound decisions while remaining aligned with the overall objectives.

For me, the key lesson was that empowerment goes beyond delegation. It depends on trust, clarity, and a shared understanding of boundaries. It also requires adapting to local language, working practices, and cultural expectations throughout execution. When leaders listen before directing and adapt their approach, differences become a source of insight rather than friction.

2. Quality by design and International governance

The second foundation is to build quality into the project from the outset.

In an international environment, quality cannot be left to final inspection because different organizations may hold different assumptions about what “good” looks like. Those assumptions need to be translated into standards, measurable criteria, responsibilities and documented evidence.

In one real situation, international standards provided a common language among the contractor, technical adviser, client and suppliers. Quality requirements and success

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criteria were incorporated from the contractual and design stages. This early alignment made the expected result visible to all parties and reduced the risk of late surprises.

Governance complemented the technical standards by clarifying responsibilities, approval mechanisms and escalation routes. In environments where teams are geographically dispersed and face-to-face interaction is the exception, robust roles and responsibilities are essential.

Document management was equally important. A common repository, accessible from different locations, created one reference point for drawings, decisions, progress, approvals and evidence. This was not simply an administrative improvement. It strengthened confidence between the parties as online discussions could be based on the same current information.

My main learning is that quality by design and governance reinforce each other: quality defines the expected outcome, while governance provides the structure to achieve and demonstrate it.

3. Global coordination and technology applied to decisions

The third foundation is global coordination supported by technology.

International projects connect design offices, suppliers, procurement teams and on-site teams that may work in different locations and time zones. Under those conditions, coordination can easily become reactive unless the project establishes shared metrics and transparent information flows.

In a real coordination case I was involved in, office and on-site teams needed to work from the same view of priorities and progress. Delayed answers caused by location and time differences could affect downstream activities. We therefore focused on objective indicators, shared digital dashboards and visible follow-up of critical interfaces. The purpose was not to create more reporting. It was to make the right information available to the people who needed to act.

I have also seen the value of monitoring the exchange of information between design and procurement, particularly for long-lead items. By following data handovers together, the teams could identify dependencies earlier and replace finger-pointing with joint problem solving. Technology supported this behavior through traceability and shared visibility, but the improvement came from agreeing how the teams would use the information.

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The best dashboard is not the one with the most data. It is the one that enables global teamwork and supports timely, well-grounded decisions.

Conclusion

International engineering projects offer an opportunity to combine global expertise with local knowledge. To unlock that opportunity, I focus on three complementary actions: trust, assure and decide. Emotional leadership and intercultural communication build trust. Quality by design and governance assure consistency. Global coordination, metrics and technology support better decisions.

These foundations turn geographic and organizational diversity into a coordinated way of working. They also remind us that standards, contracts and digital tools are essential, but they only create value when people use them to collaborate and work together as a team.

My final lesson is simple: we should design international collaboration with the same precision that we apply to the technical solution. When people share trust, expectations and information, international complexity becomes a source of collective strength and shared success.

About the Author



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People · Leadership · Trust · Common Ground · International Projects · Sustainability

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Manuel Ancizu is passionate about human-centered leadership, sustainable projects, helping people grow, and building common ground to move forward together. He enjoys working in international environments and seeks to create a positive impact on society.

Manuel holds a degree in Economics from the University of Navarra and an MBA from IESE Business School, and has also studied at CEIBS in China and Universidad Anáhuac del Sur in Mexico. He is a Project Management Professional (PMP)® and Lead Auditor ISO 9001:2015, with additional training in development projects from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

With more than 20 years of international experience, Manuel has lived in Spain, France, the United Kingdom, and Mexico. He currently works in the wind energy sector, contributing to international projects as well as cultural transformation and global process initiatives.

Manuel is an Adjunct Professor of Project Management at the University of Navarra. He also publishes articles, delivers training, and speaks at professional events on project management, leadership, and sustainability.

He serves on the Board of Directors of the PMI Madrid Chapter and is a member of the Projects Committee of the Spanish Association for Standardization (UNE), contributing to standards on project, program, and portfolio management.

Manuel loves smiling, storytelling, dreaming and turning ideas into reality sustainably.

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