A summary of Sylvia Schroll-Machl's study on

Problem-solving in joint German-American teams

by Patrick Schmidt

In 1995, German psychologist Sylvia Schroll-Machl examined the reasons American-German projects often fail. A German multinational brought her in to evaluate how American and German engineers and researchers interacted. It became clear early on that problems were due, in large part, to misunderstanding each other'sway of problem-solving.

Schroll-Machl noticed that, at the outset of a project, Germans showed a greater need for detailed information and discussion. They tended to see the process from an engineering point of view, considering all of the difficulties that might arise,planning hypothetical solutions. The goal was to make sure everything would be done correctly, every element possible kept "under control". Avoiding uncertainty means avoiding anxiety.

During the initial discussion-phase, the Germans expected all team members to share knowledge by sketching out their previous experiences. Reaching a consensus (which, they argued, permits the rapid implementation of any strategy) was essential. *Schroll-Machl concluded that German decision-making concentrated on identifying problems, their history and components. Less emphasis was placed on results.*

The action-oriented Americans found these discussions

trying, often outright boring. The exchange of too much information felt like a waste of time, "paralysis through analysis". No matter how good a plan is, the thinking goes, it will be modified along the way. The Americans didn't speak up at this stage; by not saying anything, they hoped to speed up the process and get down to work. In their minds, problem-solving started out with a short brainstorming session to define goals and establish a series of approximate milestones.

In their minds, problem-solving started out with a short brainstorming session to define goals or mission. They would devise a series of approimate milestones. Efficiency and creativity were the watchwords. The Americans wanted to "keep all options open", perceiving any project as a trial-and-error process. *Schroll-Machl found their decision-making to be more open-ended, concentrating on a mission, a vision.*

The Germans felt that with this sort of approach, the Americans were acting without fully understanding the problem: a cowboy mentality of shooting first and asking questions later." On the other hand, the Americans felt obsession with plans, and sticking to them, meant being locked into a rigid pattern, with no flexibility during the implementation-phase.

Once a plan was established, German team members

Problem-solving...
— *continued*

were able to work relatively independently. Americans expected further group meetings and informal communication throughout. The Germans complained that the Americans asked about issues which had already been discussed at length.

Basic philosophies — "going on a mission" vs "minding the shop" — were only part of the equation, though. Americans are often given tasks for which they have not been thoroughly trained. Frequent job-rotation leads to a "learn-by-doing" attitude. With this attitude, they automatically communicates more with superiors, as well as other team members. Germans are, on the whole, better trained. Mechanics, machinists and the like go through the famous "*Dualsystem*" but even engineers and executives receive a holistic mix of the practical and the theoretical. And, of course, the rules for doing business in Germany are stricter: whether it's cars, cosmetics or cold cuts, there are norms, guidelines, documentation which one actually has to read.

Germans also assume decisions made at group meetings are binding. Americans see them as guidelines which change when the need arises or a better solution presents itself. And Americans expect these changes to take place; it's part of the adventure!

Lastly, because Americans instinctively emphasize the

relationship side when communicating, they have a tendency to share more of their personality with co-workers. Germans, who by nature wish to remain credible and objective when communicating, tend to maintain a more impersonal "work only" relationship with colleagues. This explains, in large part, why Americans complain that Germans don't seem to be very open in conversing aabout a project during the implementation phase.

It is interesting that the nationality of the leader generated different internal dynamics. If the leader is German, the group is more like a coalition. The leader is both an expert and a mediator (expected to convince, not order) who tends to vote with the group. During the implementation phase, there's little interaction with individual group members. "Distant" and "difficult to reach out to" was the way the Americans put it. The American leader defines goals, makes decisions, distributes tasks and makes sure they're done. Motivation and coaching are part of the chain-of-command style.

Schroll-Machl's study makes clear that if these differences are explained at the beginning, i.e. through intercultural training, chances for success increase enormously. However, if cultural awareness is not made a priority and the different communication styles are not understood, German-American projects often fail, causing both financial loss and hurt feelings.