

*Making a Modern Project Manager*¹

Level up Your Intercultural Awareness (Part 1)²

Yasmina Khelifi

Overcome culture shock

In the [April episode](#) of my podcast, my guest [Kaori Nishiyama](#) talked about experiencing a **culture shock** when she worked in Africa.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a **culture shock** is a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation.

That is what happened to me when I did a 6-month internship in Japan during my engineering studies. My university had a partnership with an international research center near Nara, in the heart of historical Japan. It was my first time in Asia. I had been studying Japanese for a year and saw an opportunity to improve it at the same time. I didn't do much research on Japanese culture. I was confident that knowing the language would help me. When I landed, I didn't understand a word. I decided to spend as much time as possible with Japanese people and to take Japanese classes to accelerate my learning. After 3 months, I could separate the words and look them up in an electronic dictionary.

There were challenging times and shameful moments. However, I was lucky: I wrote my observations in a journal. And, people in the foreign support office in the international center explained to me some of the behaviors that I observed. Thanks to this experience, I also became more aware of my own culture, France.

I'd like to share some strategies with you for elevating your intercultural awareness.

You can also learn more in my published ebook (Bookbookn Learningà) **How to Become a Culturally-Aware Project Manager The Essential Toolkit to Survive and Thrive**.

¹ Editor's note: This series of articles is by a project manager for Gen X, Y and Z project professionals. The author Yasmina Khelifi is a project manager with a large multinational telecom in France while also an active PM professional, authoring articles, interviews and a popular LinkedIn blog as well as a podcast with a global audience. Also active in PMI France for many years, she has been an international correspondent for the PMWJ since 2021. We are delighted that she has agreed to author a series of articles based on her personal experiences over the last decade.

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Do your homework

Basic Facts

Look for some basic information about the country: capital, main economic cities, some important historical facts, language(s) spoken, main bank holidays, and other relevant information that can help you. In this investigation phase, you can reach out to friends, and colleagues, visit a cultural center in your country or check on the internet.

Geographical Maps

Recently, I've started to include a geographical map in my project kick-off template. It is a way for me to be fair and more inclusive. I colored the countries of the project team members with the same color and added the names of my team members. The way we represent the world in maps has changed over the years, as [Graham Brown](#) explains in [this social media post](#). As an experiment, I've requested some friends and colleagues to provide me with the world map they have in textbooks.

World Map version 1



World Map version 2



Maps transmit not only facts but also geopolitical situations. So be cautious when you use them not to offend your team members.

Check the body language and business etiquette

Gestures and body language should also be part of your research. In this [article](#), you can find general information. In Japan, I bought a short book: *Japanese Etiquette Today: A Guide to Business & Social Customs* by [James M. Vardaman](#) and [Michiko Vardaman](#). It helped me to decipher some gestures I didn't understand and also to use them when I talked in Japanese.

Get familiar with languages

Globish, Global English

This is simplified English for communication purposes. English is the de facto business language. If you like using idioms, jokes, and literary words, this is the best way to lose non-native speakers and exclude them.

Beyond the vocabulary, the way you speak has also an influence. I've been working with British people for a few years and some of my colleagues spoke very quickly. This was fine for small talk, but not during project executions, especially when we had issues. I can understand it's not easy to slow down when you're a fast speaker like me in French, but this is the price to pay to be successful in a global environment.

Local language(s)

If you have the opportunity to learn some basic words of the local language, do it! Understanding how the language works in terms of grammar or absent words can give some hints about the way people think.

Corporate language

If you visit a country as a tourist, you can get a flavor of the local language and the way people interact. Nevertheless, working in a corporate environment is different. A great resource is the [workplace jargon dictionary](#) by [Gorick NG](#), author of the excellent book [The Unspoken Rules](#). It is also important to have a mentor, an accountability buddy, or a support service to guide you. Ask for a glossary of acronyms if it exists.

For instance, in my firm, we use people's first names, we use 'TU' (you, singular), whereas we tend to use 'VOUS' (the equivalent of you in the plural when we do not know people), and we shake hands or give a kiss on the cheeks every morning. Unlike French Canadians, we use many English words in the corporate French world: "meetings", "conf calls", "deadlines" and "forward".

Now, that we spoke the same languages, does it mean our global collaboration will be smoother? Not necessarily. You'll learn more in **part 2**.

How do you improve your intercultural awareness? I look forward to reading your advice and tips.

About the Author



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Yasmina Khelifi, PMP, PMI- ACP, PMI-PBA is an experienced project manager in the telecom industry. Along with her 20-year career at [Orange S.A.](#) (the large French multinational telecommunications corporation), she sharpened her global leadership skills, delivering projects with major manufacturers and SIM makers. Yasmina strives for building collaborative bridges between people to make international projects successful. She relies on three pillars: project management skills, the languages she speaks, and a passion for sharing knowledge.

She is a PMP certification holder since 2013, a PMI- ACP and PMI-PBA certification holder since 2020. She is an active volunteer member at PMI France and PMI UAE, and a member of PMI Germany Chapter. French-native, she can speak German, English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and she is learning Arabic. Yasmina loves sharing her knowledge and experiences at work, in her volunteers' activities at PMI, and in projectmanagement.com as a regular blogger. She is also the host and co-founder of the podcast [Global Leaders Talk with Yasmina Khelifi](#) to help people in becoming better international leaders.

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