

# CULTURE SHOCK OF ALLIANCE PROJECTS

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The Alliance procurement approach is used to stimulate collaborative working between project participants. When human resources are drawn from traditional project environments, the extent to which this is realized depends, in large part, on the ability of project participants to manage the shock of transition to a radically different organizational culture. Exploring the nature of this transition and individuals' experiences and coping mechanisms for dealing with it, we propose a theoretical model of culture shock, which helps to explain the transition process into alliance projects. We conclude that projects that recognise the culture shock that individuals experience are better equipped to manage 'non-alliance' behaviours and steer the right behaviours from these individuals to fit within the new culture.

Keywords: alliances, culture, culture shock, procurement, relational contracting.

## INTRODUCTION

The Australian construction industry has been extensively criticised in recent years for its poor performance and productivity (RCBCI 2003; Davis and Love, 2011). Part of the solution to this problem has been the development of new collaborative procurement approaches such as alliancing, which are said to challenge the construction industry's historically ingrained adversarial practices (Jefferies *et al.* 2006). Although alliancing is in its embryonic stages of development internationally (Hauck *et al.* 2004), its use in the Australian construction sector has been extensive, particularly in complex building and infrastructure projects where complexities make traditional procurement options problematic to implement (Walker and Hampson 2008; Davis and Love, 2011). In simple terms, an alliance project is meant to be differentiated from traditional contracting by two core principles: sharing risk and reward and; behavioural alignment to project objectives. The sharing of risk and reward is achieved through a project alliance agreement, which incorporates a gainshare and painshare model (Yeung *et al.* 2007). Behavioural alignment is achieved through relational-based integration that encourages trust, cooperation, long term commitment and a sustainable relationship throughout the project lifecycle (Yeung *et al.* 2007). Given that these principles are fundamentally different to those which drive traditional procurement approaches, the success of an alliance project depends on the ability of participants to steer-away from the traditional adversarial approach and work collaboratively (Davies and Love 2011). While there has been research in the areas of alliance contractual arrangements, knowledge management, organisational culture, and alliance capabilities, the issue of cultural transition from a traditional to a relational-based project culture has not been explored (Walker and Hampson 2001; Duysters and Heimeriks 2005; Jefferies *et al.* 2006). Recent focus in

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construction research has steered towards issues that impact culture to improve performance (Gajendran *et al.* 2012).

A better understanding of the behavioural changes that need to occur for successful transition between these cultures is important in explaining the continued variability in project alliance performance being experienced in many projects (Duysters and Heimeriks 2005). In this context, the aim of this paper is to critically review the literature and explore the concept of culture shock as a theoretical construct. Our objective is to develop a theoretical model which can be used to understand this process in more detail and guide further research in the area.

### **The difference between traditional procurement and alliance procurement culture**

Organisational culture has been a topic of interest in the organisational studies literature over the last thirty years and has a plethora of definitions. For the purpose of this paper we define organisational culture as the social glue that holds the organizational members together and expresses the values, social ideas, basic assumptions and beliefs that members share within a work environment (Peters and Waterman 1982; Martin 1992; Denison 1996; Helms and Stern 2001).

#### **Traditional Project Culture**

There are three basic models of traditional contracting in construction, namely 'construct only, design and construct and project management'. These forms of contract either utilise external consultants to design the scope of works with the contractor engaged to build under a separate agreement; issue the responsibility of design and construction to the contractor with their own chosen architect/designers; or utilise trade contractors to complete the work under the management of a principal contractor. Typically, traditional contracts are 'won' through competitive bidding processes based on fixed pricing or schedule of rates arrangements (DTF, 2010). The well documented risks that project participants face with this contracting style include poor design, poor construction, scope changes due to changing conditions, design errors and poor communication (DTF, 2010). To deal with these potential problems, contracts are written to allocate risk, leading to a lack of cooperation, distrust and adversarial behaviours between project participants who see their futures as independent of, and even in conflict with, those of other project participants (Rowlinson and Cheung 2006; Walker and Rowlinson 2007; Hauck *et al.* 2004; DTF 2010). As Ankar *et al.* (2009) point out, this culture of antagonism and confrontation has become known as the way 'things are done' in the construction industry.

#### **Alliance Project Culture**

As Gajendran *et al.* (2012) point out, attention to cultural issues in construction has gained momentum in recent years in an attempt to improve the performance of the industry. Yet as they also point out, a clear understanding of how culture influences performance has not yet emerged and nor has a commonly accepted notion of what it means. In this context, it is not surprising that alliance project culture is not well defined in construction research. However, in trying to understand this we do know that two key elements define alliance projects and in essence provide the cultural framework that establishes alliance relationships. These include the hard (contractual) element and soft (relationship) element. The distinct difference between alliance and traditional projects is the 'working environment' that is created through the contractual arrangements of the Project Alliance Agreement (PAA). Alliance partners

are generally selected before a project price is considered and agreed with resources that are pooled with relevant expertise and are considered to best maximise the potential from the shared risk and reward (Walker *et al.* 2002; Hauck *et al.* 2004).

Collaboration between partners is a driver of success (Rowlinson and Cheung 2006), and this is developed in an alliance through the careful selection of project participants. Adapting behaviours to the overall project objectives through sharing of ideas and information in order to expose hidden risks and new opportunities to improve performance is vital (Rowlinson *et al.* 2006). Risks and rewards are agreed through an open book financial approach where corporate costs are placed at risk to ensure project costs are met, and a bonus mechanism is agreed and shared by all alliance partners to drive and encourage innovation, excellence and optimal project solutions (Walker *et al.* 2002; Hauck *et al.* 2004). The idea is that this also eliminates hidden risks and drives the project team to have a sense of ownership and to focus on outcomes rather than blame. Trust is reinforced in the PAA through a 'No Dispute' clause in the agreement, where participants waive the rights of action against each other (Cheung and Rowlinson 2005). Therefore, trust is crucial within alliance teams (Davis and Walker 2009) and at the most basic level, alliancing is dependent on individual's adapting their behaviour to the new type of project culture, which requires and values collaboration rather than conflict.

To drive this behavioural change, performance measures in alliances are typically aligned to desired behaviours (DTF 2010) and are driven through Key Performance Indicators (KPI) which are an important element of setting up the project objectives and which are not normally seen on traditional contract projects (Cheung and Rowlinson 2005). These KPIs are non cost indicators and generally focus on three target tiers in areas including: Safety; Community; Environment; Quality Assurance; Innovation and Human Resource Management. Tier 1 relates to expected levels of performance, for example; rate of frequency of lost time injury; Tier 2 relate to stretch targets which aim for better than expected performance, for example; reducing the project program through innovative approach to resourcing; and Tier 3 relates to breakthrough targets which require a paradigm shift and / or new ways of operating.

A collaborative organisational culture is argued to be one of the 'non-price' elements that is fundamental to a successful alliance. The culture is set through the initial framework that is agreed between project participants and underpins the joint decision-making process and commitment to the no-blame, no fault ethos. This framework is designed to drive optimal performance through alignment of commercial interests to develop powerful relationships (DTF 2010). An outline of the differences in culture between traditional and alliance projects is compared in Figure 1 using Schein's 1992 Model of Organisational Culture.

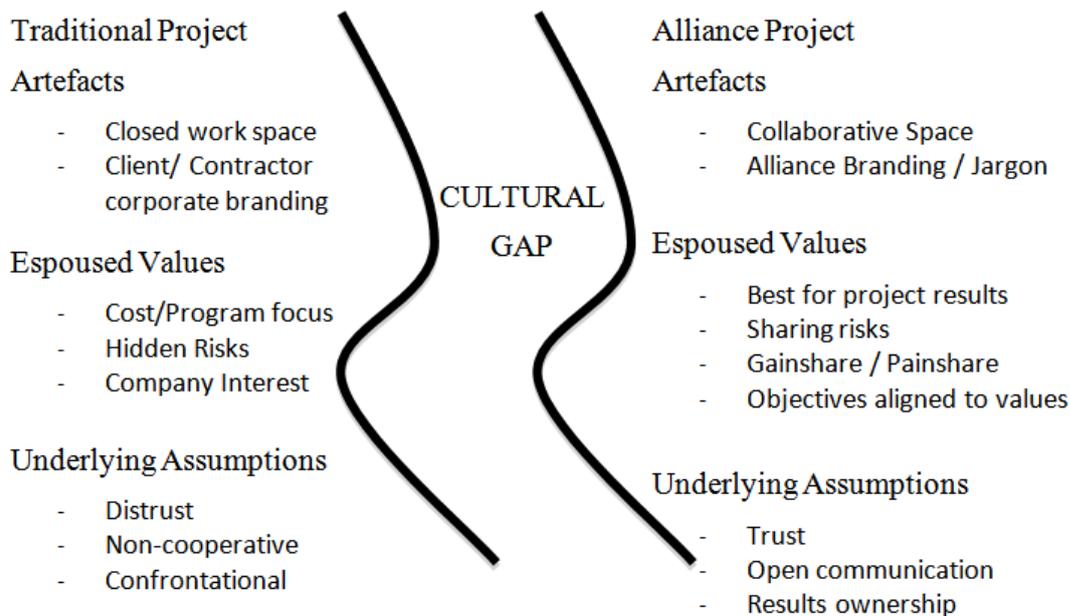


Figure 1: Cultural Difference between traditional and alliance projects

## CULTURE SHOCK

While the idea of a collaborative project culture is good in theory, the reality of alliance projects can be very different. Project participants bring with them habits and behaviours formed in old traditional cultures, which may lead to culture shock and consequentially problems in adapting to a collaborative approach to communications and the management of inter-firm relationships and conflict. Marx (1999) suggests that the culture shock experience is not limited to geographical relocation and while the concept of culture shock has been explored in the areas of international education, international aid, international and business culture, migration and tourism, there has been no research in the construction industry to explore the experiences of individuals in transitioning from traditional project to alliance project environments.

Culture shock is a term that is used to describe the disorientation and confusion experienced in moving from familiar to unfamiliar environments. Specifically culture shock has been defined as ‘a state of distress one experiences when experiencing an unfamiliar environment’ (Furnham and Bochner 1986; Hofstede 1999); ‘the experience of foreignness’ (Marx 1999) and ‘being out of place in a certain place and time’ (Irwin 2007). The broader view of culture shock extends to the process of adaptation, which refers to the ‘changes that occur as a result of culture shock’ and the acculturation, which is the extent to which an individual adapts to the foreign culture over time (Ward 1996; Manz 2003). The experiences described above are perceived by individuals as a threat to their well-being in a new environment, and are normally associated with negative feelings. Individual identity becomes unfamiliar, leading to feelings of helplessness, desire for dependence, anger and fear (Furnham and Bochner 1986) or any sort of distress, mentally or physically experienced in a foreign location (Irwin 2007). Indicators of culture shock include not feeling a part of the new culture, confusion in role and role expectations, and not being able to cope with the new environment (Oberg 1960; Furnham and Bochner 1986). Marx (1999) later suggested that working within a new culture can produce a variety of reactions such as confusion, anxiety, frustration, isolation and depression as well as exhilaration. However, research also indicates that individuals who experience culture shock

experience it as a routine part of the adaptation process from one environment to another. Culture shock occurrences are normal in foreign cultural environments and dealing with culture shock effectively requires recognition of their existence, implementing behaviours to overcome the shock and utilizing adaptation strategies to deal with the exposure to culture shock (Winkleman 1994; Furnham 1993; Manz 2003; Zhou *et al.* 2008).

While numerous researchers have identified the negative effects of culture shock, few have explored its positive aspects. To this end, Adler (1975) and David (1971) believe that culture shock could be viewed as a transitional experience which results in adopting new values, attitudes and behaviours (Furnham 1993), and can be achieved through having a flexible approach to the situation (Manz 2003). A review of the culture shock literature indicates that there are generally four phases involved in the culture shock process (Oberg 1960; Adler 1975; Berry 1980; Mohamed 1997) with research since Oberg determining that culture shock is an expected routine process of adaptation to cultural differences (Furnham 1993). As a result of this, most of the literature over the last decade or so heavily focuses on the adaptation or acculturation to the new environment through strategies such as increased knowledge, acquisition of new skills, and emphasis of the positive aspects of cultural adjustment. (Furnham 1993; Ting-Toomey 1999; Manz 2003).

It is possible that people within organisations face culture shock as a result of the different business cultures (Hofstede 1999) as working in these environments challenges individual identity. It is widely accepted that people move through the phases of culture shock at different rates depending on a range of factors, such as the cultural distance between the familiar and unfamiliar environment and their cognitive capacity to adjust (Marx 1999; Manz 2003). While Oberg (1960) argued that progression through the phases of culture shock is a sequential process, Marx (1999) argues that people progress in a dynamic and repetitive cycle of positive and negative phases until the breakthrough of culture shock. Marx (1999) also produced a culture shock triangle to show how managers that travel internationally deal with culture shock. The model exhibits three dimensions: emotions to deal with mood swings; thinking to understand a foreign environment; social skills and identity development to create a social and professional network and; develop effective skills to manage these networks.

Marx's Culture Shock Triangle evolved from questions to determine the levels of culture shock international managers face with the objective of providing a framework to assist individuals in gaining a better understanding of different cultures. The model determines three adaptation levels to dealing with culture shock: coping with the stress of the transition; changing the perception and interpretation of events and behaviour leading to a way of thinking that is culturally effective; and developing better social skills (Marx 1999). These three components may be applied to individuals that are transitioning from traditional to alliance projects. The emotional aspect can be used to identify whether individuals are experiencing any negative emotions towards the alliance during the initial stages of the transition process, and put in place coping mechanisms to deal with the transition. The thinking component can be applied to establish the gap in cultural learning; that is, what further information and support an individual requires to ease the level of foreignness that an individual is experiencing in the new culture. The social skills and identity component can be utilised to determine what networks and relationships the individuals needs to forge to assist not only in day to day job functions, but in terms of socialising within the alliance culture.

The earlier models of culture shock focused on mental health issues as a result of migration and focused on individuals as victims of culture shock, whereas these later models are based on psychological and educational theories that regard the individuals that are facing culture shock as an active participant in the process (Zhou *et al.* 2008). Although a simple process that can be indirectly applied, the model is limited in that it lacks the behavioural adaptation required to transition within new cultural environments.

Ward *et al.*'s (2003) ABC Model provides a differential view to Marx's in that it depicts culture shock through management of how people think, behave and perceive when exposed to different cultural influences of a second culture, or in the case of alliance projects, a radically different culture to one of traditional projects. The model focuses on two domains of adaptation that are relevant for acculturating individuals into new cultures: the psychological domain refers to psychological wellbeing and satisfaction, and the socio-cultural domain which refers to the ability to operate effectively in new cultural environments. This model suggests three components of the culture shock process – affective, behavioural and cognitive. The affective component is associated with stress and coping mechanisms, and resembles Oberg's initial representation of culture shock as a period of disorientation and confusion. It deals with negative emotions instigated through unfamiliar environments, such as traditional projects vs. alliance projects and highlights responses such as anxiety, perplexity, and a desire to be elsewhere. It is managed through emphasis on social support and emotional resilience.

In an alliance setting determining the right candidate for the role and providing site mentoring maximises the individuals' ability to adapt (Ward *et al.* 2003). The behavioural component is associated with cultural learning, suggesting that individuals that are culturally skilled are more likely to achieve their goals, forge beneficial relations, and eliminate the negative effect associated with cultural contact and influences. Extending social skills and knowledge within an alliance project may reduce misunderstandings and allow individuals to understand and model the expected behaviours. The cognitive component considers how individuals define their own identity both inwardly and outwardly, so that they can cope with their definition of social reality. Ward *et al.* (2003) suggest four alternative approaches: remaining mono-cultural in their traditions, succumbing to the new culture, synthesising both elements of cultures and becoming bicultural or oscillating between cultures and not identifying with either.

When exploring the ABC Model, Ward *et al.* 2003 discuss the affective and behavioural components as tangible elements of how people deal with culture shock. For example, the affective component focuses on an individual's stress levels and coping mechanisms. Similarly the behavioural component focuses on skills and knowledge that can be attained by individuals. The cognitive component however is not immediately visible in individuals as it focuses around their thought processes of self identity (Ward *et al.* 2003) and as such, manifests itself within both the affective and behavioural components as outcomes, and ultimately drives the stress, coping and cultural learning theories. Although a complex process met with difficulty in separation of the individual components (Zhou *et al.* 2008), this theory is concerned with adaptation and adjustment and can be applied to alliances to determine the coping process involved with cultural change.

*Culture Shock in Alliance Projects*

Drawing on the behavioural and affective components of the ABC Model and Marx’s Culture Shock Triangle thinking component, we propose a theoretical model of culture shock in alliance projects (Figure 2). This model distinguishes between the cultures and practices of traditional and alliance projects and acknowledges that the individuals transitioning between the two environments will undergo two cyclical processes simultaneously. The two processes are: culture shock experienced in the new environment, and coping within a new live project environment. In essence, individuals not only have to carry out their day to day roles whilst experiencing culture shock, they have to also adjust to it whilst experiencing it at the same time. Whilst experiencing this process, individuals may be feeling negatively about the project, have sense of loss from their comfort zone of the traditional project environment and are stressed by the unknowns and changes within this environment. Simultaneously, for individuals to feel a sense of contentment and well being within their roles, the individuals are required to develop new skills to deal with a radically different culture and adjust to the new environment swiftly. Attributes within the culture shock and coping management processes may include coping with communicating openly, collaborating with alliance partners, subcontractors and colleagues and sharing all information with all stakeholders which are typical and expected behaviours within alliance projects. Typically, individuals in this situation will not have been socialised to the values and behaviours pertaining to the alliance environment. It is therefore important for management within the alliance project to provide interventions to assist with management of stress and adjustment.

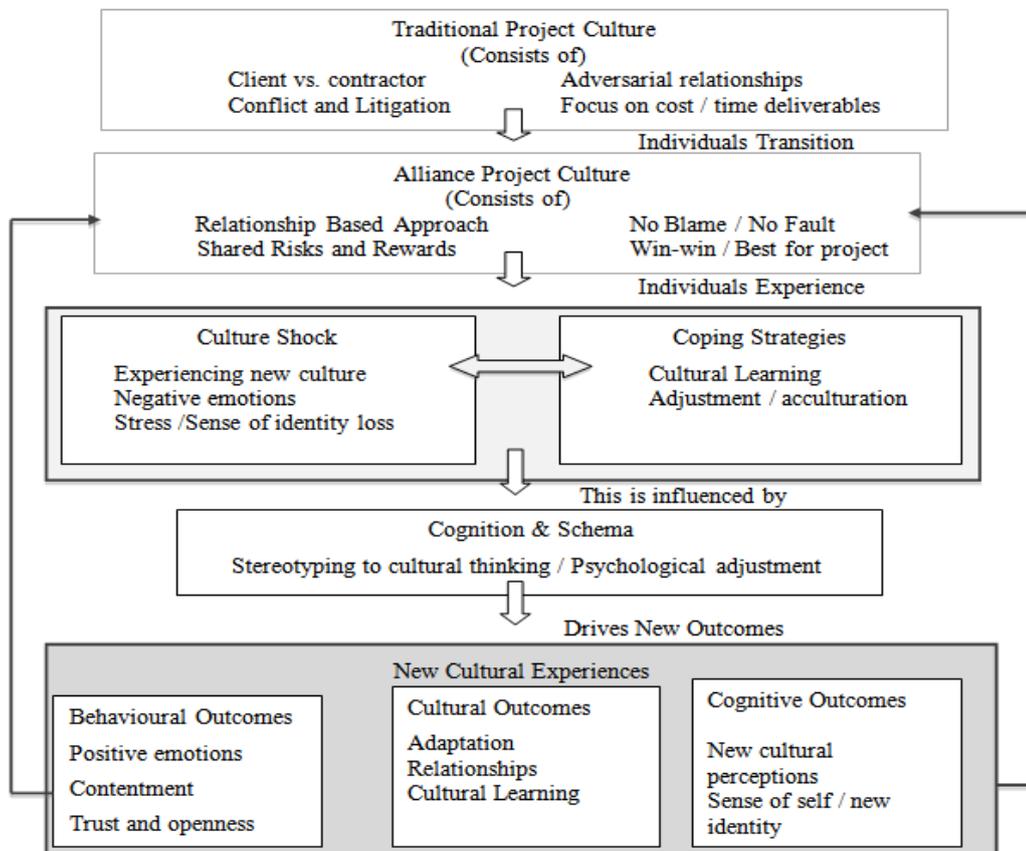


Figure 2: Culture Shock Model of Alliance Projects

The next stage of the model suggests that the culture shock and coping mechanisms stages are influenced by individuals' schemas and cognitions. This stage of the model bases itself on Marx's 'thinking' component where thought processes ultimately drive new behaviours, cognitions and cultural learning's that are then filtered back into the alliance culture. A schema is a knowledge structure that exists in an individual's memory that is developed to encode and represent new incoming information, which enables individuals to orientate themselves within their new surroundings (Harris 1994). The model insinuates that individuals will ultimately be influenced by their new and old experiences and individuals will develop project specific schemas that provide internalised and non-internalised beliefs and values and ultimately an insight and commitment to the alliance culture (Harris 1994). These specific schemas may evolve through the individuals' experience of culture shock or, may be engineered through the interventions that are applied by management.

Further, the model shows that this will result in new cultural experiences with positive behavioural, cultural and cognitive outcomes. Individuals will experience these new outcomes that are reinforced through positive thoughts and feelings towards the project. This can also be achieved through acquisition of new or enhanced skills, a relationship building approach to managing contractors and client, and a new sense of identity. The affective, behavioural and cognitive components are what form the basis of the alliance culture, which is shared at a project level through individuals' sense making of their new environment (Harris 1994).

## **CONCLUSION**

The aims of this paper were to explore the culture shock concept related to individuals that transition from traditional to alliance projects through understanding of the behavioural changes that need to be adopted. This paper explored the differences in cultural environments between traditional and alliance projects utilising Schein's organisational culture model to describe the differences. It is evident that working within alliance projects requires a relational based approach where individual behaviours relate to open communication, collaboration and a strong focus on achieving best for project outcomes rather than individual gain. This radically different approach can result in culture shock for individuals transitioning to this environment. We explored the concept of culture shock and introduced Marx's Culture Shock Triangle and the ABC Model as exploratory models to determine the components of culture shock that may affect these individuals. Using the basis of these models, we have developed our own model to explore the culture shock process for individuals during their transition phase, hypothesising the behavioural, cultural and cognitive outcomes to be tested in alliance project environments for future research. We conclude that projects which recognise the culture shock that individuals experience are better equipped to manage 'non-alliance' behaviours and steer the right behaviours from these individuals to fit within the new culture.

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