

U.S. and German Misperceptions in Business Dealings

Esquimos develop skills for survival different to those of nomads living in the Sahara. Likewise, excelling in American society requires some different skills and behaviors than prospering in German society. Compared to a country like China the differences between the United States and Germany are often subtle and unexpected – but nonetheless real and important for both personal and corporate success.

Contrasting Cultures

By Thomas Krauss, Krauss Consulting

When comparing cultures it is helpful to bear in mind the words of the U.S. sociologist, Nancy Adler: "Culture is what most of the people do most of the time, not what all of the people do all of the time."

Intercultural coaches are not able to describe how Americans or Germans are, but rather focus on describing differences in how individuals from different cultures have learned to behave in specific roles and situations to be successful within the mainstream of those cultures.

Americans dealing with Germans observe the Germans' behavior and normally assess it based on their own, learned expectations for a particular situation (i.e. how a "good" boss motivates, makes decisions, leads a team, etc.) and not by the standards of the German culture. Sometimes this results in a percep-

Business (Mis)perceptions – U.S. Perspective

- Germans always begin with: 'it can't be done'
- Germans don't give praise
- Germans always focus on the problems – not the solutions
- Germans are inflexible and cling to outdated plans
- Germans don't inform us properly (too late)
- German presentations put us to sleep
- Germans are stiff, impersonal, rude, and arrogant (use of criticism)
- Germans cling to outmoded habits and lack creativity
- Germans always know better
- Germans are no 'fun' to work with

tion very different from the one intended. Understanding how the other culture perceives and interprets our behavior in critical business situations is the first step toward expanding one's behavioral repertoire so as to avoid cultural misperceptions and misunderstandings which can negatively impact one's career and business unit performance.

Here is a list of 10 typical cultural (mis)perceptions which plague German and American business dealings along with 12 Golden Rules to help reduce unproductive conflict and improve overall performance across cultural boundaries. ■

Business (Mis)perceptions – German Perspective

- Americans aren't open and honest with us
- Americans espouse absurd visions and set unachievable goals
- Americans dive into hectic activity without proper analysis
- Americans readily discard agreed upon plans
- Americans don't inform us properly (provide the info needed)
- Americans are naive and arrogant (ignore our legitimate concerns)
- Americans hold lots of meetings which don't accomplish anything
- Americans put on "shows" not serious business presentations
- Americans are superficial and have little capacity for self-criticism
- Americans are self-centered and obsessed with making money

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12 Golden Rules for Germans – Tips for Interacting with American Colleagues

1. Communicate positively and aspire to high goals
 - use optimistic, goal oriented, up-beat messaging
 - sell yourself: impress with a track record (success breeds success)
2. Invest time in “small talk”
 - establishing a personal relationship is a prerequisite for developing a good working relationship
 - remember: in business situations “small talk” = “big talk”
3. Praise colleagues and subordinates for normal accomplishments
 - praising only the exceptional is too little and thus de-motivating
4. Be indirect with criticism
 - direct criticism of the subject matter usually implies criticism of the person
5. Be pragmatic – focus on solutions not on problems
 - “brainstorming” is usually preferred to detailed analysis
 - solve the issue at hand rather than design “the grand scheme”
6. If it’s important, do it quickly (not thoroughly)
 - you can always go back and adjust as necessary
7. Treat your American boss like a four-star general
 - remember: “the boss is the boss”
 - if you are the boss, act like a (benign) four-star general
8. Presentation time is “show time”
 - communicate a benefit-oriented message
 - reach out to all of the people and all parts of the people (intellect, emotions, common sense), all of the time!
9. When negotiating, pay attention to process as well as substance
 - using a good negotiation system will improve results while building relationships
10. When you want something done, communicate “what’s in it for them” or get it included in their objectives
 - their prime responsibility is to contribute to the success of their boss
 - their priorities will reflect their performance objectives
11. Respect all conventions relating to cultural diversity
 - employers must ensure a nondiscriminatory work environment in which all groups are treated with respect and enjoy equal opportunities for advancement
12. Be friendly and keep smiling...
 - life is tough enough, why make it any tougher?

12 Golden Rules for Americans – Tips for Interacting with German Colleagues

1. Speak slowly, distinctly and avoid using jargon
 - remember: for them it’s a second or third language
 - give them time to mentally translate and formulate a response
2. Respect their ‘private sphere’ and get down to business promptly
 - ‘small talk’ is kept to a minimum in most business situations
 - information about family, hobbies, personal background, etc. is reserved for family and friends – not new business associates
3. Get used to the fact that praise is scarce
 - skilled craftsmen are expected to provide consistently high quality
 - only that which is unexpectedly good deserves praise
4. Be friendly but direct and explicit with criticism
 - criticism of the subject matter need not imply criticism of the person
 - they are less accustomed to ‘reading between the lines’
 - deciphering nuances in a foreign language is no easy task
5. Be analytical – focus on the problem (not just the solution)
 - comprehensive analysis and detailed problem-solving are more highly regarded than positive generalizations and visions
6. Allow (much more) time for important decisions
 - important decisions deserve thorough analysis and preferably a consensus judgment; these are deemed more important than speed
7. Treat your German boss like a master craftsman
 - you are obliged to intervene if he is about to harm the masterpiece
 - if you are the boss: treat subordinates like skilled journeymen
8. Presentation time is definitely not ‘show time’
 - deliver a detailed, comprehensive, logically structured message
 - go long on intellect, short on humor and emotion
9. View negotiations as a joint effort in problem-solving
 - a credible initial offer should be close to the realistic ‘best solution’
 - this is serious business, not a game of ‘poker’
10. If you want something done, give them a problem to solve
 - refrain from expressions like ‘another great opportunity,’ etc.
 - let them know they are the best person to solve this difficult problem in the interest of the entire company (solidarity is highly valued)
11. Temper optimism with REALISM
 - realistic assessments and goals coupled with understatement and a touch of humility are signs of an accomplished professional
12. Remember: a professional is a polite but ‘serious’ person

AmCham Germany actively tackles issues of intercultural communication with seminars and meetings. Here is a list of related issues to be discussed at future events:

- Global business skills
- Working successfully with the Americans
- Diversity

See www.amcham.de for more information or contact:

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