

How to do business with germans

Business



Anyone can contribute as long as they have something to add to the theme under discussion-otherwise they are not expected to participate actively. The manager will weigh up the arguments, make his decision and delegate tasks. For him. There is no question but that his decisions will be implemented regardless of whether the person chosen to carry them out agrees. An employee will accept the decision and does not expect to participate in the decision-making process. Only senior people are in a position to question a manager's competence and decisions.

British and American managers in charge of German employees frequently express frustration at their subordinates' seeming inability to make decisions for themselves- but they are simply not accustomed to doing so. Decision making, problem solving and security risk avoidance and thorough analysis are the main concepts here. German managers tend to feel uncomfortable with situations over which they have no control. As taking risks implies less than complete control, they attempt to control the risk by analyzing all potential new projects thoroughly before making decisions. The reasons are historical, psychological and economic.

Germans associate risk with the possibility of failure-something they have learned to avoid since their school days. Young people grow up in a system where mistakes are punished by negative grades and failure is punished by having to repeat a school year. They learn to fear making mistakes. They enter working life taking a low-risk strategy of avoiding undertakings that are not 'guaranteed' to achieve success. Before achieving their current status they will have learned how to balance risks and potential benefits insensitively, and this is done by objective analysis. Communication style.

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German verbal communication patterns are one of the greatest sources of confusion to others. In brief, they are very direct, short and to the point, and can thus appear to be abrupt and demanding. The content of the message is more important than the means by which it is transmitted. The word "müssen" (have to) is used much more frequently than in English. Germans whose command of English may be very good, but who lack an understanding of the undertones of communication styles with English-speaking people, tend to translate directly, reducing English expressions using German communication patterns.

While Britons and Americans tend to value their independence and consider being asked rather than ordered to carry out a task as a sign of respect, Germans accept authority more readily and, although they may prefer to be asked, they will do something despite being ordered to. When faced with the German pattern of getting to receiving instructions put in the form of a request, feel put upon and talked down to. Understatement will generally not be understood. In German, the 'please' may be placed by an acceptably friendly tone.

They are also prone to forget it when speaking English. The US anthropologist Edward T Hall uses the concept of high- and low-context cultures to explain these differences in style. In low-context cultures, people have a need for information to be transferred in great detail and very explicitly. High-context cultures, on the other hand, favor inference more than explicitness. Germany is a very low-context culture requiring explicit, to-the-point information. The United States is medium to low context, whereas Britain is medium to high context.

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The widespread use of e-mail, particularly for international intra- corporate communication and for day-to-day communication in international projects, is resulting in numerous conflicts, with many Britons and Americans complaining about the Germans' 'rudeness' and 'lack of respect' for their counterparts. While these complaints may appear justified if viewed only from the perspective of the receiver, the style of messages sent, in fact, needs to be viewed from the perspective of the sender (German), in addition to the context of international e-mail communication as a whole.

E-mail is a fast and easy-to-use communication medium. Consequently, it is frequently used quickly, without too much thought concerning the process. E-mail in itself is able to display almost no personal context between the parties communicating. It is therefore in itself direct. Added to the very direct German communication style, the result to the British, who value indirectness, and even Americans, who, although they too tend to value directness, also value a personal touch, may appear too hard hitting. The consequence tends to be unnecessary conflict.