

Cultural Differences between Germans and Americans

The way Germans and Americans think is fundamentally opposite. Germans are trained to think deductively, to take a scientific approach. Deductive means the details are first thought of and then put together to form a goal. Americans are trained to think inductively, first form a goal or vision and then figure out or fill in the details later.

The styles can conflict because Germans can think of the American approach as unrealistic: They want to see data supporting the goal whereas Americans tend to get impatient with the details, wondering if the goal will ever be reached. Germans are “thinkers” while Americans are “action-oriented”. The negative side of this perfect German planning and visionary American thinking is that Americans may put a product on the market that is great, but not 100-percent error-free while Germans may analyze too much and be late to market with a new product.

Americans tend to have a “can-do” attitude. Germans tend to be more cautious and accept that things may not be possible. Americans teach their children they can be anything, even president. This seems over-optimistic and unrealistic to Germans. “Es geht nicht,” or “It can’t be done,” is the sentence Americans remember the most in German. This German sense of realism can be so irritating to Americans that they interpret it to mean Germans have a negative attitude, which Americans in turn associate with a lack of creativity and flexibility and a sense of obstinence.

Communication styles also can lead to misunderstandings. Generally speaking, Americans do not like to directly disagree with one another. They rarely use the

word “no” when disagreeing, relying instead on euphemisms such as “I see your point, however, you might want to consider..” Germans prefer to debate a point to find the best option, and when they disagree will often start with, “No, I think..” or “I disagree”. Americans interpret “no” as blocking the conversation. Germans interpret the congeniality of someone agreeing all the time as being weak. No to a German does not mean he has made up his mind finally.

Another word that causes contention is “problem.” Germans use it to describe an issue, worry, concern or difficulty. Americans think everything is a problem to Germans, whereas for an American it usually means “crisis”. Americans use “issue,” “concern,” or “challenge” when describing what to Germans is a problem. This can confuse Germans into thinking there is no problem when there is one.

Listening styles also play a role. Americans are active listeners, looking at someone, responding with a nod, gesture or “I know what you mean”. Germans sit quietly and listen, waiting for a pause before answering. The American style can be perceived as disruptive or irritating to a German, in fact be seen as NOT listening. Americans wonder if Germans are even paying attention to what they are saying.

Keeping in mind some of these crosscultural differences, is the safest way to ensure positive results.

Tips for U.S. Managers working in Germany

- Use a bit more formality in your interactions with Germans. (Assess whether first or last names are appropriate.)
- Speak slowly and clearly when speaking English. (Leave out the slang words and acronyms.)
- Check body language and how the other person is receiving it.
- Don't be afraid to be direct in communication. It will be highly regarded.
- Be prepared to be argued with, this is a natural process for Germans to understand a task. Make good, concrete, unemotional arguments in response.
- Lay out expectations clearly in the beginning, especially communication processes. (Information flow and feedback loops.)
- Focus more on the task first, relationship later. (Don't forget to socialize after work; it still helps to build a strong team!)
- Focus on content and less on packaging when "selling" an idea or product. (Beware of too much optimism or exaggeration.)
- Present as much detailed information as possible upfront
- Make what's obvious to you, obvious to them.
- Be patient, the outcome has the potential to be above and beyond.
- Talk about the cultural differences openly.

© 2005 Melissa Lamson

Weitere Infos zum Thema:

Dr. Dämmrich Unternehmensberatung GmbH
Kurfürstendamm 21
10719 Berlin
030.88 70 6-4031
info@daemmrigh.de
www.daemmrigh.de