



Differences and commonalities in dealing with trust in German-French co-operations

The values Germans and French link to work are different, but there are also commonalities. In our news-story "[Living to work or working to live?](#)" from November 2nd, 2010 we already focussed on the cultural dimension "work attitude".

Today we would like to look on how French and Germans deal with trust building in the business environment.

The analysis of the differences but also of the commonalities is the first step for a functioning collaboration. The second step – the creation of a joint fundament for working together – can only be successful if both involved parties bring openness, tolerance, give-and-take and some willingness to do something that is out of character.

Trust can only be established through a grown personal relationship. A personal relationship can only flourish when "real interest" is the basis of the two (or more) partners involved.

How do we deal with trust building in the business world, in an environment which is not primarily defined by „real interest“ but by doing business and earning money.

In Germany it is the custom to purposely separate business from personal relationships.

Germans are task and project driven – they do everything to reach a defined goal, the goal alone is motivation enough. When Germans are working together with French partners, who are of course also focussed on the task, and work towards the same goal – this is a commonality – there is an additional aspect: it is important to establish a personal – which does not equal 'private' – relationship with the business partner. The crux, since one starts on a commonality: being focussed on the same task, both parties think, that all is going according to plan. "We are not facing any difficulties working together with the French/with the Germans. For sure there are cultural differences, but no problems." This is the general opinion at the beginning of a co-operation. This feeling remains until the first minor and superficial misunderstandings and resentments occur. Misunderstandings and resentments lead to unsettledness and one starts to question trust, which one tried to established „on the go“ à la „let's get started first, so we can get to know each other, trust will establish itself on its own." Now it becomes obvious, that this hasn't been possible, that trust has not established itself „on the fly". If trust was established one would be in a position to bring the misunderstandings and resentments up and have a constructive dialogue about it. But in many scenarios, one doesn't talk about the problems, it leads to more misunderstandings, and one is stuck in a downward spiral. The result: „We just can't work with the Germans/ the French".

To escape from this kind of situation is exertive, uncongenial and tedious. To rebuild trust and to overcome the frustration that goes with it is always more difficult than taking the time to establish real trust in the beginning of a business relationship, through openly communicating one's expectations and agreeing on common rules which create the basis on which trust can in fact be established.

One way of doing this delivers the „third culture building“ approach, in which co-operating partners with different cultural backgrounds jointly create a third culture which enables them to have a common ground for working together for the lifetime of the co-operation. The conscious development of an organisational culture – within any co-operation – must deserve closer attention, in order to push the process forward of melting two (or more) organisational and geographical cultures together on the operational level right from the beginning. One agrees on the rules of working together. By doing this one agrees how one deals with punctuality, deadlines, feedback, hierarchy, planning and management style. This joint process of developing the third culture in itself creates a different, often better, starting basis for co-operation, since one sits down at a table to analyse differences and commonalities. This step, to discuss the so called „meta level“, is logically less complex and less cost intensive, when you do it right at the beginning. Conversely, to conduct this step when you already have a deadlock situation is time consuming and cost intensive.

Actually, it is pretty simple; the involved parties explain themselves to each other, why one likes to work in one way or the other. In this way you prevent many misunderstandings which only develop because of different

expectations along the lines: “we are always doing it like this”. In such a workshop it will crystalize, that many French (and many other Southern Europeans) have a stronger desideratum of a real trust relationship than many Germans. When looking at trust, it is not about whether one feels the necessity of trust (Germans also have this requirement) but to what degree one wants a basis of trust, in order to have common ground to work on successfully together. Very important in this context: what needs to be down – concretely – in order to establish the bespoke trust level. When you apply your cultural sensitivity, just think of a slide control, which you move accordingly to the needs of your business partners, in order to minimize the discrepancy and to establish a harmonious basis. In many countries the separation between personal trust and business doesn't exist, these two aspects are tightly interwoven. As “straight forward” Germans (to speak in a stereotype), one gets accused in Southern Europe of being distant, cold and calculating, exactly because of the culturally driven separation between personal relationship and business.

As always, the right dose of trust in the business world is relative and flexible. One must be aware of one's own (corporate) culture and the associated values. It is all about linking one's own (company) values and those of the business partner together in a way that fosters trust. It is not at all about pushing „the German“ or „the French“ (company) culture through. This would be the worst of all basis.

If you put this deep-rooted and essential topic on the agenda – at the beginning of a partnership – you can help prevent hitting the cultural wall. Preventing this will decrease the frictional loss, decrease investment cost and will save time.

If you want to base your French-German co-operation from day one on pillars of success, we are guiding you through establishing the third culture within your co-operation. Send us an [e-mail](#) or give us a call: +49 (0)6221 – 735 13 71. We are looking forward to hearing from you!