

Cultural Divides in German-American Business Alliances

by Julia Gaspar-Bates

Despite the proliferation of international business alliances in today's global environment, many people remain mystified as to how their foreign clients, colleagues, or associates think and operate. With frequent mergers and acquisitions, managers assume that objectives and goals will be aligned, despite the cultural borders. And if English is the lingua franca, then what sort of problems can occur? Unfortunately, communication still breaks down and the path to reach satisfactory goals often takes many hazardous twists and turns. In many cases, these divergent paths cause much frustration and stress for the parties involved, often resulting in loss of valuable time, lack of motivation and productivity, and misunderstandings, which ultimately affect the bottom line.

While there is no simple solution to managing these differences, the more savvy managers and their employees become to their counterparts' culture, the more seamless the transition to working together becomes. One example of a cultural misunderstanding was described by Mike, an American employee working for a German car manufacturer. He indicated that when the German headquarters asked its U.S. subsidiary to build a quality car, the Americans focused on accessories that would appeal to an American consumer, such as electric locks and windows, CD players, navigation systems, etc. However, when the Germans arrived to examine the final product, they were very frustrated, disappointed and discouraged with their partnership. The Germans were less interested in the interior accoutrements. Their notion of quality only involved the engine and the question of its longevity. While both the Americans and Germans assumed to understand the meaning of "quality", the interpretation was very different. This case, and others similar to it, reinforces the importance of clarifying messages from the outset. Had the Germans been more specific in their request and stated that they wanted a vehicle that had an extremely reliable engine, there would have been less disappointment with the outcome. Likewise, if the American team had probed further into the German notion of "quality" they would have succeeded in providing the technology the Germans expected.

Communication breakdowns are among the most common challenges to working across cultures and it requires extra time and a deeper awareness of one's expectations to convey messages in ways that will not be misconstrued. Sadly, since most of us are not familiar enough with the intricacies of the different cultures with which we interact, we frequently make mistakes unwittingly. The danger is when these innocent errors are not corrected and cause irrevocable damage to the relationship or business partnership.

Birgit, a German national living and working in the U.S., had held several jobs in training and sales before she started her first job in the U.S. She explained that job roles are clearly defined in Germany and performance expectations encompass one's predefined role only. Shortly after starting her new position in the U.S., she became very frustrated with the lack of training and task definition of her job responsibilities. She did not

understand what was expected of her and that thinking outside the box was highly encouraged. In retrospect, she realizes that if she had received cross-cultural training, she would have been more productive and less discouraged.

Birgit's situation demonstrates a typical example of a person from a hierarchical culture, who is used to top down management, arriving in an egalitarian one where taking initiative and self-motivation are the keys to success. Very few managers would have realized that Birgit's expectations as a foreign national would differ considerably from those of her American colleagues and therefore assumed that as a competent professional she would slip easily into her new role and define it as best fit her.

While Germans and Americans share many characteristics—such as valuing punctuality and meeting deadlines, and favoring direct and honest communication—these two examples illustrate how easy miscommunication can occur. In both cases, the lack of clarity of expectations or roles caused damage to the relationships with the other parties involved. Since communication involves encoding and decoding information, ideas, emotions and symbols, recognizing that speaking the same language is not enough without truly understanding the cultural values, assumptions and rules will help in alleviating some of these misunderstandings. And while it is impossible to effectively learn all the cultural nuances, it is possible to develop some tools and strategies to avoid mishaps that will leave you confused and frustrated or destroy trust and relationships that you have painstakingly cultivated—and allow you to sleep more peacefully at night.