

Decision-Making Across Cultures

by Julia Gaspar-Bates

The challenge of concluding a Franco-American business deal can often baffle even the most astute international businessperson. No matter how culturally savvy each party may be, when the time comes to make a final decision, there is a distinct difference in approach. As a result, there can be frustration on both sides as the expectations of each may interfere with establishing a successful partnership. The American will typically look at the potential outcome of the partnership and, if seemingly favorable, will dive in and close the deal. Until proven otherwise, taking a leap of faith is paramount to success. The American thrives on innovation and change and as a result, taking a risk is viewed as a positive step towards progress. After all, if the plan does not go accordingly, it is possible to reassess the process and change course.

For the French businessperson with a Cartesian mindset, the pros and cons must first be weighed carefully before making a final decision. Because of the hierarchical structure within many French companies, numerous meetings may occur with the results reported to senior management who may then demand a period of reflection before determining an action. The ramifications of making a rapid decision on a deal that is subsequently unsuccessful can be a curse for the French. In a culture where failure is not easily forgotten or forgiven, taking the time to explore all angles of an issue before making a decision is imperative to maintaining credibility and the reputation of the company and individual concerned.

Building awareness of each party's position can ensure a smoother process and a stronger partnership in the long term. A French businessperson who recognizes that the American's quick decision is not a result of reckless inexperience but rather a desire to test an action and to make use of time efficiently will be less critical and more able to communicate his or her circumstances. Likewise, an American who is cognizant of why the French need to take ample time can set more realistic objectives when making deadlines. Our cultural perspectives therefore dictate not only our actions but also our reactions to situations and our expectations of others' behaviors. Once a basic understanding of the expectations relevant in each culture has been established, it is easier to relax and adapt and this will ultimately ensure a smoother and more harmonious partnership.