



Sylvia Schroll-Machl

Doing Business with Germans

Their Perception, Our Perception



Sylvia Schroll-Machl, Doing Business with Germans

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With 3 Diagrams and 1 Table

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■ Foreword

According to a 3000-year-old Chinese proverb concerning successful communication with strangers, “Only he who knows himself and his counterpart well can achieve one thousand successful encounters.” Here the number one thousand really stands for an infinite number, thus guaranteeing success in all encounters for those who take heed of the proverb. In the context of international cooperation, a modern version of this ancient Chinese proverb could be: “Only those who really understand their foreign colleagues and themselves can achieve success in international business.” The truth of this statement becomes obvious when we think about the vast amount of knowledge foreigners need to understand the style of working and living, the norms and standards, customs and traditions of the new country in which they are planning to live or work. When asked what motivated them to make their move, students planning to study at a foreign university, young people taking part in school and youth exchange programs, experienced managers and specialists taking part in international professional work exchange programs and many tourists planning a trip abroad often have the same spontaneous, simple answer: “I wanted to get to know the country and people better” or “I wanted to broaden my horizons.” Many training and qualification programs – and even more travel and guide books – have attempted to meet the need for extensive and accurate information about foreign countries and their customs and traditions.

It is generally accepted that “global players” who are fit to “walk and work around the world” need to have a good measure of understanding, openness and curiosity about anything new and different, a dash of tolerance and, to round off the successful recipe, intercultural awareness.

Experienced travellers who have not been just visitors and spectators, but who have actually come to know a particular foreign

country and have worked and forged common goals with their foreign partners, report that each new country represents a new and demanding challenge.

In the foreword of his book “Chinese Characteristics,” published in Leipzig in 1900, Arthur H. Smith quotes Sir Robert Hard, General Director of the Chinese Customs Authority, who had lived and worked in China for over four decades: “China is a very difficult country to understand. A few years ago I believed that I had finally progressed so far that I was able to understand something of the country, and tried to write down my views. Today I feel like a complete novice again. If I were now required to write three or four pages about China, I would not know where to start. I have learnt only one thing. In my country we are told to stand firm and resist, even if this means that in the end we break. In China the opposite applies: let yourself be molded and changed, but don’t allow yourself to break.”

This statement is remarkable in many ways. First of all it shows that the more information and experience we gather about the people and culture of a foreign country, the greater our awareness of how little we actually know and understand of the supposedly “familiar” land and its inhabitants and how to get along with them. In addition Sir Robert Hard’s comments make it clear that for him, his wealth of knowledge resulted not only from his many years of experience in dealing with and observing his Chinese partners, but was also in part due to his ability to reflect on his own country and culture.

Most people who, like Sir Robert Hard, report back on their experiences of a foreign country and its people, tend to speak exclusively about the things that have seemed strange, distinctive, incomprehensible or illogical. The foreign culture is the main focus. Our own culture functions as a yardstick against which to measure and judge the foreign culture, and is not often seen with fresh and critical eyes, as was the case for Sir Robert Hard. The second part of the Chinese proverb regarding “successful contact” refers to this self-knowledge, which is often lacking and therefore not taken into consideration.

International collaboration is often difficult for everyone involved because the behaviour of the respective foreign partners rarely matches their expectations of one another. To make the matter more complicated, the reasons for this unexpected behaviour are neither apparent nor comprehensible. This is, however, a very superficial and

simplified view of the actual situation. The most serious challenge to international collaboration is not posed by lack of knowledge about each other, but lack of understanding of ourselves: of our own values, norms and rules, of how we perceive, think about and assess situations, of how we behave. We are completely unaware of how others perceive us and the effect we have on them. What is the reason for this lack of awareness of our own culture?

People from different nations and cultures who strive to work, communicate and cooperate together grew up in and were socialised within their own individual cultures. They were taught and came to accept the socially and culturally relevant norms, values and behaviours during this upbringing. As a result, they have adopted and individually adapted a very specific system of orientation which is typical for their culture. During the entire learning process the main characteristics of this culture-specific orientation system, which influences and governs thought, perception and behaviour, were taken for granted and accepted as a normal part of everyday behaviour, and therefore no longer noticed on a conscious level.

Everyday experience teaches us that other people can be expected to behave like us, and that our behaviour is generally accepted by others and is therefore *correct*. As a result we are convinced that people acting with good intentions will (or should) act as we have learnt to, and as we have experienced as positive and successful: our assumptions have never been challenged. If we meet someone whose behaviour does not meet our expectations, we automatically interpret this behaviour negatively, as being the product of ignorance, incompetence or unwillingness – or we may even suspect some ulterior motive.

Of course we know that people from other nations and cultures behave differently to a certain extent, along the lines of “other countries, other customs,” and we are therefore ready and willing to accept a certain level of difference. If, however, this behaviour deviates too far from our expectations or, even worse, contradicts one of our own important behavioural norms, we can no longer be tolerant. Behaviour that once intrigued us as being “exotic” can instantly become *something that needs to change* and deserving of training, reprimanding, correction or perhaps even some other more radical form of indoctrination. Even when the whole basis for cooperation between international partners is in dire danger because of varying expectations and behavioural differences, it is rare that either side

will stop and reflect upon how their own culturally-created behaviour has contributed to the problem.

The way we perceive and interpret a situation occurring in an international setting depends on our own cultural orientation system, which in turn reflects only one possible approach among many. It is only natural that the actions of a foreign partner will seem strange, and for this reason it is important that each person in an international setting recognises the situation in its entire complexity, and defines it as *intercultural*; as *different* and not strange and wrong. Intercultural experiences, no matter how dramatic and extreme, unfortunately do not automatically trigger a process that helps us to understand our own cultural orientation better. Instead, this level of awareness can only be achieved when very specific cultural information is available, as well as the means to apply it.

This book was written for exactly this purpose: to provide the information and examples necessary for recognising and understanding the intricacies of German culture. Anyone who has grown up with German culture, and who needs or wants to deal successfully with people from different cultures, will gain insight into their own culture and their own cultural orientation, which in turn will enable them to better understand their experiences with foreigners. Germans will learn to understand how their behaviour looks from the outside and, in this way, can learn how to modify their behaviour in intercultural settings to make the cooperation more productive, enjoyable and successful.

The experience on which this book is based does not come from philosophical, historical or psychological research by Germans about Germans. Instead, it comes from the sharing of many first-hand observations and experiences of Germans by foreigners. This book concentrates on their observations of the culturally specific German behaviours which have perplexed them and caused them considerable problems and grief. Their observations and insights are surprisingly similar despite their differing nationalities.

What German readers of this book can learn is the result of systematic collection and analysis of those behaviours which foreigners have repeatedly identified as “typically German.” We can only begin to understand our own culturally specific orientation system and the effect it has on our foreign partners when we begin to look at ourselves from *their* perspective.

For the non-German reader, this book represents an excellent source of information on the culturally specific orientation system that makes something “typically German.” Some of the most strongly rooted typical German culture standards include:

Objectivism (objectivity, task-focus); appreciation for rules, regulations and structures; rule-oriented, internalised control; time planning; separation of personality and living spheres; low-context communication and, finally, individualism.

This book attempts to define culture, culture standards, the limitations and possibilities presented by these definitions, and the part played by history in their development in the German context. The main part of this book deals with the detailed description of the central German culture standards and an exact analysis of how they form the basis of German behaviour. It also analyses the advantages and disadvantages of each culture standard with regard to interpersonal communication and cooperation. Suggestions are offered on how to resolve the resulting challenges and problems. Recommendations on dealing with the culture standards are made for both non-Germans working with Germans and Germans working internationally.

This book is distinctive because it is based on real-life experiences and was designed to be used in real-life situations. These real-life experiences are not a collection of random, unrelated events put together without rhyme or reason by the author. Instead, they are firmly anchored in a scientifically researched concept of culture, in which culture is seen as an orientation system, which in turn is determined and defined by specific culture standards. Furthermore, it gives German readers the necessary tools to master the difficult task of perceiving and understanding their own system of orientation within German culture, which is the prerequisite for understanding and dealing with the behaviour of their foreign partners. For non-German readers, this book provides a wealth of information to aid their understanding of the peculiarities of German behaviour which have previously been incomprehensible, and have had a negative effect on their interactions with Germans. In this way, everyone will be better equipped to deal effectively, productively and enjoyably with each other.

This book provides excellent educational material for learning how to approach intercultural encounters and exchanges so as to get the most out of them. Each partner, German and non-German, will be able to harness the culture-specific resources involved in their in-

tercultural encounters as effectively as possible. The material can either be used as a self-study-guide or to accompany intercultural coaching and vocational training programmes.

This book will help you to achieve one of the most important factors for future international success: intercultural competence.

Alexander Thomas

■ Introduction

■ Why a Book about Germans?

With globalisation becoming ever more pervasive in everyday life, many people are faced with challenging new situations. Cultural differences no longer fascinate only tourists and intrigue academics, they present very real and everyday challenges to people working internationally:

- expatriates, who live abroad with their families for a period of time;
- people working for a company in their own country, but who end up on foreign business trips as much as at home because of an increasingly international customer base;
- members of an international team, or of a “virtual team” scattered around the globe;
- companies with subsidiaries abroad, where colleagues in the various locations work in close contact with one another;
- companies experiencing post-merger integration difficulties where employees now have to cooperate with new colleagues in different countries;
- companies which have been acquired or sold where the employees now have to adjust to a foreign management style;
- in search of an appropriate job, some people may only find adequate and attractive positions abroad (brain-drain emigrants);
- and the list goes on!

Whether they like it or not, all of the people in these situations are faced with the challenge of having to communicate and interact with people from countries other than their own. This book is about dealing with this challenge, with a very specific context in mind: amongst the industrial nations, Germany is an important player in interna-

tional business. For this reason many non-Germans have to get along with Germans, be it as guests in Germany or in their own countries. Likewise, many Germans come into daily contact with people of all nationalities on a business level, be it face to face or via modern telecommunications. For non-Germans, it is important to have as much information about Germans as possible in order to be prepared. It is also very interesting for Germans to learn how their non-German partners view them and to see themselves from a different perspective. Only by keeping the other person's perspective in mind can they adjust to the specific behaviour and expectations of their counterparts, monitor their own culturally determined behavior and be less decidedly German, depending upon what the situation calls for.

This is why I called this book: "Doing Business with Germans: Their Perception, Our Perception." It is important for me to begin from the foreigners' viewpoint of Germans, so that Germans can learn to understand how they are seen from the outside. It is also vital that non-Germans can reflect upon their observations and experiences with understanding of the German perspective, so that they can come to understand what Germans really mean when they say or do something.

Both perspectives are especially important when we begin to discuss *intercultural competence* and what it means: understanding of the *cultural logic* of others (for the non-Germans) and insight into one's own culture (for the Germans). Hopefully, this book will help both sides to achieve this.

■ What this Book Holds for You

I am both an experienced intercultural trainer and have completed research at the University of Regensburg in intercultural psychology. I want to share with you the knowledge I have been able to accumulate during the many intercultural training sessions I have held as well as the results of my research at the Regensburg Institute of Psychological Research. The stories and examples in this book either relate to professional work experiences in Germany or with German companies or stem from the everyday experiences of expatriates living in Germany. These stories and examples have been recounted, acted out or observed during my seminars, coaching sessions and

research interviews. They offer a clear picture of how non-Germans view Germans and their behaviour, and what they classify as “typical” for Germans.

Behaviour follows certain rules, and I will be talking about the motivation behind the way Germans behave. My goal is to help the reader to understand this motivation and therefore the behaviour it gives rise to. Reflection on one’s own culture is always difficult but necessary in order to explain the logic behind it to foreigners who want to understand us better. I have also attempted to explain the historical background which formed the German character and to make it more understandable.

■ Which Germans are Described in this Book?

When I speak to a German audience and refer to the “German character” I inevitably get the response: “I’m sorry, but I have to disagree. I come from Bavaria/Cologne/Hamburg (or some other place) and what you say is only partially true there. You really have to distinguish between the Northern Germans/Bavarians/Swabians (or some other German regional grouping).” Or they say something like, “Yes, that’s how it used to be, but now the situation is different . . .” (meaning, of course, that it has improved). These reactions exemplify the first, and in my opinion one of the most deeply rooted, German characteristics: No-one wants to be deemed typical. It is always the others who are “typical Germans” – persons from other regions, from other social groups, or only the men or the older generation – “But I’m not that way at all – not completely – anyhow.” From an historical point of view this is all quite understandable, since Germany has only existed as a united nation since 1871 (or since 1990 depending upon how you view it), and for this reason there is no long tradition of a common German identity.

Nevertheless, let me say the following – especially to my non-German readers:

1. Your own cultural background is the major deciding factor which determines how you understand what I will describe. Many of the cultural traits may seem familiar to you; the differences may be very difficult for you to understand; and in some cases a trait may

- be stronger in your own culture than in Germany. This is because there are areas of similarity between cultures, and it could be that your culture is very close to that of Germany in some or many aspects, but in others very different. Since this book is about the most obvious differences which many people from a wide variety of countries notice about German culture, and deals with generalisations helpful to an outsider looking in, there will be times when you see little difference and others where you see a lot. I can only ask for your patience and understanding – keep on reading until what I have to say is more relevant to you and your culture.
2. It is not my goal to say anything negative that could create a gulf between Germans and non-Germans. Instead I wish to share the experiences that foreign colleagues have shared with me, sometimes expressing humour and surprise, other times disappointment and offence. My wish is to make German culture more understandable and so to improve the quality of our interactions. Unfortunately, negative experiences such as disappointment, frustration and anger are often the first ones registered, and they lead to the wrong conclusions and make it difficult to break through barriers. If we can learn intercultural competence, we can avoid much frustration and end up with a much more pleasant working relationship between non-Germans and Germans.
 3. What I have to share with you in this book is what Germans regard as normal, everyday behaviour: things which are considered correct, appropriate and usual. I have attempted to explain the ideological background to “typical German behaviour” so as to help non-Germans deal with it without irritation and anger. As a non-German, you need to understand these things and know what to expect so that you can be prepared. Once you know a bit about what to expect, adjusting to living in Germany or working with and getting along with Germans becomes a lot easier. It is not my intention, however, to defend or apologize for what would be considered rudeness and bad behaviour even by Germans. Unfortunately, such examples do occur. Once you have read this book and have an overview of German culture standards, you will be better able to distinguish between what is typically German (even when it may be rude in your culture) and why, and what is just bad manners independent of cultural differences. You will then be able to distinguish between experiences which can be generalised and

those which are one-off, and avoid putting them together. This will help you stay happy and motivated in your interactions.

To my German readers, I would like to say:

1. As soon as we speak of the German character, most Germans automatically expect the worst and automatically want to exclude themselves from any such generalisation. This situation repeats itself over and over again. As soon as we make *any* attempt to make a list of typical German characteristics with a group of foreigners, it is seen by Germans as a bad omen. Strangely enough, however, the word “likeable” never appears on this list, although “friendly” appears more often. Germans try to defend themselves by saying, “Yes, but there’s a positive side to being this way. In this way we can always be sure that everything is being managed effectively and efficiently.” At least this is how they explain themselves about 90% of the time. Only rarely can Germans accept a description of their “typically German characteristics” from a neutral standpoint. My German readers may also find it hard to be neutral. It is worthwhile to keep the following in mind. What I have to say about Germans is not all bad, and I certainly am not criticising anyone. The traits and characteristics I call “typically German” have just as many pros and cons as those of people from any other country.
2. Of course, Germans are right to be sceptical! A pharmacologist who understood my dilemma once explained it to me as follows. He said that any study having to do with “living biological matter” can only be discussed in terms of probabilities – there can be no absolutes, because there are always exceptions. A statement about a generalisable empirical result, which is true for many cases, has already taken normal deviation into consideration and, to be accepted as correct, describes *tendencies*. Judge for yourself: as you read each chapter, you are sure to recognise many different Germans with whom you may have come into contact. And certainly you will say to yourself repeatedly: “But my friends and colleagues aren’t that way.” Any German who is honest with themselves will sometimes recognise themselves in these examples, other times not at all. Behaviour is determined by a myriad of factors, not just cultural influences, and it is these factors together with the situation which determine how we behave. Additionally, each person will respond differently to a set of circumstances depending on

their personality, and on the choices they make: we all have “room to move” and can make conscious decisions about how we behave. Nevertheless, the simplified and generalised observations and statements in this book correspond to the collective “truth” of real life.

3. German readers should keep in mind that regional and gender-specific differences that they see are only minimally noticed by foreigners and are not relevant to a portrayal of “the bigger picture.” Such fine differences will only be perceptible to a foreigner who has lived in Germany for a very long time. This is also true for the influence of recent history on the development of German characteristics. Germans tend to emphasise the developments and changes that have occurred in their personal values and behaviour from the standpoint of what those values and behaviours used to be. Foreigners cannot do this: they only see Germans as they are now, using their own cultural orientation as a yardstick. Accordingly, whereas Germans may see themselves as having become softer and more relaxed with regards to rules and regulations which were previously written in stone, outsiders will still see them as comparatively obsessed with such structures and allowing their lives to be more strictly ruled than is normal in many other cultures.

The people who are described in this book and who provided the examples come from many different countries. Most are from countries where my employers have business contacts: Western, Central and Eastern Europe, the United States, Brazil, Australia, India, Japan and China. People from other cultures and countries will certainly have had similar experiences, but they have not been in any of my seminars. At the start of each chapter in the section called “How Germans are Perceived by Other Cultures” you can read a range of spontaneous responses from foreigners who were asked about characteristics they had particularly noticed. These responses are neither representative of the broad population nor complete, and agreement or disagreement with them will vary from person to person, or culture to culture.

Nevertheless, it is true that, regardless of their own cultural orientation, the observations made by non-Germans are very similar. By putting together the many-faceted reports, which look at Germans from many different angles, we can put together a picture of “typical” German behaviour. Germans cannot ignore this feedback;

given the importance of careers and professionalism to them, they cannot afford to disregard the impression they make on their foreign colleagues. These impressions cannot be viewed as strange quirks but must be understood. After all, we are talking about work, not play.

Although it would be easier to refrain from “stereotyping” what is “typically” German, especially since the negative aspects come quicker to the fore, this would mean sacrificing a useful tool for intercultural understanding and orientation. Paradoxically, the more complicated the situation, the more useful the stereotypes become.

■ Acknowledgments

In recognition that this book is not the product of one single person, I wish to thank the many people who helped to make it possible. During my intercultural training sessions on Germany I was very fortunate to be able to experience the vast breadth of reactions to the theme “The Germans.” The participants were able to tell their stories and express their opinions, sometimes in the form of role-plays which obviously had a cathartic effect on them. I observed questioning faces, heard about trials, annoyances and disappointments, and all related to the theme “The Germans.” After the dust from these eruptions had settled, it was my job to try to explain what had happened from the German perspective, and to try to give plausible explanations of what lay behind the German behaviour in question: why they did and said something. I was often able to help my foreign audience to understand the situations better, the “aha!” effect of the penny dropping and things making sense, which is a positive result producing a more positive view of the Germans. The Germans who took part in these discussions were extremely interested and found them very illuminating about their own behaviour; so much so that I was encouraged to write about and share this knowledge and these experiences. I wish to express my thanks to all of the participants of my seminars who shared with me so openly. I wish to thank the personnel managers who decided to hold these training sessions and to continue them on a regular basis. I also want to express my gratitude and thanks to everyone who was so supportive during the writing of this book, especially Andrina Rout for lending her language skills. With respect to the scientific side of this book, I also wish to thank

all those who participated in my many research interviews for giving their time and commitment, especially Professor Thomas and all of the colleagues in his department, for their willingness to share their entire collection of information with me.

■ What are Culture Standards?

■ The Basis

When two people from different cultures have to deal with one another, each person initially behaves “completely normally,” meaning in the way a typical Chinese, Brazilian, American, Russian or German would behave in a particular situation. Because both of them have to interact in order to achieve their goals, problems occur when what is deemed “normal behaviour” in China, Brazil, America or Russia deviates from how the other person would behave in the same situation. Both people feel alienated and irritated because their modes of action are not compatible with one another.

If people from different cultures have little or no knowledge about the cultural norms and characteristics of each other, they have no choice but to act in accordance with the social patterns and rules they have learned in their own culture, and to evaluate the interaction in terms of what their definition of “normality” is. Consequently, they often fail to consider that different ways of dealing with every day life or work situations might exist; instead, they deem their own, well-known ways to be the only sensible ones available.

Should these people continue to work together, the situation often becomes increasingly difficult and conflict-ridden, making it very stressful for everyone. Each one attempts to adjust, control and make sense of their own behaviour as well as that of the other using their own cultural orientation. However, the cultural orientation system that individuals acquired during their own socialisation will fail in this situation, because it is not able to understand and anticipate the behaviour of someone from another culture. For this reason people often act and react inappropriately: they misunderstand one another, misread situations, feel insecure and, in extreme cases, are completely incapable of taking action.

The whole process is a complex one:

1. First, we try to explain and understand the different and disturbing behavior of the other person. To do so, we usually resort to imagining how we would interpret a similar situation in our own culture. We also take into account all the information available about the other person's culture, and this knowledge may largely consist of prejudices and stereotypes.
2. Then the correction process begins. We want to correct the unexpected effect our behaviour has had on the other person. Both people now concentrate on the problems in communication and begin a number of more or less accurate reflective and analytical processes. At worst, the tried and tested strategies from our own culture are implemented and the gap widens. At best, other methods of regulating the interaction are tried, which at least partly take the views and behavioural patterns of the other person into consideration. This may lead to a de-escalation of the situation.

This procedure is strenuous because it is laden with obstacles. Because there is so much information on which to reflect and sort out, considerable time and energy is needed to correct and adjust our way of thinking and acting. Since the effects of any interactive action taken are uncertain, every situation becomes heavily laden with stress and tension and "Business as usual" becomes impossible.

The solution to this dilemma is to acquire more information about the other culture, so that (1) the explanations become more accurate and (2) we can choose the best corrective strategy. Our own cultural orientation system has to be expanded to incorporate understanding of the foreign culture. Both orientation systems must be used. This is why I am trying to impart to my non-German readers a glimpse of the "German soul." On the other hand, Germans need to be aware of their own cultural and behavioural patterns. Only then can they identify the sensitivities of others and restrain from doing things which approach the "pain threshold." These are my reasons for delving into and analysing the German way of thinking and behaving in such detail.

Unfortunately, problems in intercultural interactions can cause considerable damage to international business relations, creating time-consuming setbacks and unpleasant disturbances. The worst problem is that initially, the problems and the perils may be well

hidden or underestimated. After all, we are all just human beings. We all see, hear, love, hate and fight; we all want to work and to achieve something; we all want the best for our families. We may be speaking different languages, but surely this is a surmountable problem. But the fact is that we all see, hear, love, hate, fight, work and care for our loved ones quite differently. Our goals in life may nominally be the same, but the methods we use to reach them are quite different, and this is exactly the point at which our difficulties begin. First and foremost, these problems are rooted in invisible cultural differences (convictions, opinions, values and attitudes), all of which demand and deserve a great deal of respect. If the people interacting could only respect *each other's* values, then the relationships would succeed.

■ The Definition of Culture

To what extent is it possible in this context to speak of cultural differences? I admit that the question may sound pompous, but it is technically valid to pose it, as definitions of culture are convoluted and extremely variable. I too use the term in a specific way and have adopted the following definition, which is in accordance with Kroeber und Kluckhohn's (1952) analysis of varying culture definitions and is also based on the theoretical works of Boesch (1980):

- Culture imparts meaning. Through culture, objects and events take on an order, a sense, a function and a meaning and become tangible to individuals, groups, organisations and nations.
- Culture offers mankind a way of thinking about and dealing with physical and theoretical matter. Our own culture also sets boundaries around how things should be dealt with.
- Throughout human history, each group of people has come up with a different system of defining and orientating themselves using their own concepts regarding sense, meaning and purpose. Cultures are the result of this process.
- Cultures have always existed, and during the course of time every culture has been transformed by internal and external influences.
- Culture serves as an orienting force in a world where the rise and fall of events can be overwhelming.