

Culturewise – Focus on France

French Business Culture

France is not only the largest country in Europe, but also one of the continent's most diverse. Bordered by seven countries, crossed by five chains of mountains and exposed to continental, Mediterranean and Atlantic climates, France is composed of a range of regional and ethnic identities, each with their own particular joie de vivre characterised by cultural and historic differences.

French geographical diversity is accompanied by huge cultural diversity and a society which thrives on apparent contradictions; a highly individualistic culture flourishes in the most centralised state in Europe; technological modernism co-exists with a sometimes semi-feudal approach to status and hierarchy; while a hugely egalitarian society boasts some of the most elitist education institutions in the world.

The State

French cultural attitudes towards the nature and location of power have a number of echoes in French business. Firstly, many companies expect the state, via the education system, to release onto the job market people that are already trained and fully operational. The widespread tendency for Anglo-Saxon companies to develop extensive graduate and on-the-job training programmes can sometimes surprise French counterparts who are more used to working within a state-supervised system of training levies. Secondly, there may on occasion be a certain suspicion of eccentricity in the work environment, whether that eccentricity is expressed in unusual dress, unexpected behaviour or lack of conformity. The attitude of 'irreverence' towards those in positions of authority that can sometimes be seen in UK business is less likely to be welcome in France.

Rebellion, opposition and individualism

In spite of (or possibly because of) the respect for strong centralised power in France, there is also a parallel attachment to individualism, instability and social rebellion.

At work, this attachment to individuality manifests itself in a profoundly French attitude towards team working. Contrary to stereotypical beliefs, French teams work as effectively as any other, albeit in a somewhat different way than is common in Anglo-Saxon cultures. Nevertheless, French team members tend to see the whole methodology associated with 'team-building' as a waste of time. Instead they often prefer to be told what they have to do by a team leader with an explicitly directive role. The leader matches assignments to people, and the individuals are then left to work towards the agreed goal. Although team meetings are considered useful ways of following work

progress and assessing each participant's point of views, they will subsequently be followed by informal discussions and exchanges of specific information between team-members.

The importance of hierarchy

Foreign business visitors often remark on the strongly hierarchical or 'Eiffel Tower' management structures they encounter in France, with strict divisions between those at the top and the rest of the organisation.

While many of these traditional French attitudes to hierarchy are changing in response to the challenges of globalisation, traditional French attitudes towards the importance of hierarchy and status still have a number of important implications for foreign business people. Firstly, the consensus building commonly found in other European cultures is not as important a part of decision-making as elsewhere.

Secondly, French managers often go to great lengths to build up an informal network of personal contacts to enable them to subvert strict hierarchies and get decisions made quicker. This can appear strange to business people from more task-oriented cultures.

Thirdly, it can sometimes appear difficult for Anglo-Saxon managers to encourage French staff to work outside particular job descriptions, or take ownership of problems that do not specifically and unequivocally fall within their remit. French junior executives can sometimes also appear more anxious to pass problems on to a superior than might be common in other cultures. Finally, demonstrating respect for the status of your counterparts and colleagues can sometimes entail acting with a greater degree of formality than you might be used to.

Elitism and egalitarianism

In France, to a greater extent than many other cultures, access to senior job roles is based on educational qualifications. In particular the ruthless and elitist selection that takes place during French secondary level education is specifically designed to enable the top people to enter the best universities, and from there to a management fast-track. In business, to a much greater extent than in many other cultures, the degree you hold and the institutions that delivered your degree remain fundamentally connected with your later status at work. Do not be surprised therefore if you encounter individuals at senior positions without much relevant work experience - they may have been hired for their educational achievements alone.

French logic

French education favours the presentation of knowledge in a way that favours deductive reasoning: first, the abstract and theoretical framework is established and then specific cases are used as

illustration. This leads many graduates of the French education system to adopt a similar way of analysing situations or issues. In practice this means an exhaustive consideration of all possible perspectives before arriving at a logical and coherent conclusion. The counterpart of the Anglo-Saxon business need for a plan ‘that works in practice’ can sometimes appear to be a French response – ‘it may work in practice, but does it work in theory?’

Overseas business visitors need to be aware that decisions perceived as being imposed without a suitable level of consultation may encounter fierce resistance. Those who complain of French meetings that ‘never get anywhere’ are missing the point. Consensus building is rarely part of decision-making in France. The purpose of many meetings is not actually to come to decisions, but to ensure that feelings, ideas and opinions are expressed and listened to. The real decisions are likely to be made outside the meeting environment by the senior manager in charge.

In addition, the French affinity for debate and the desire to fully express feelings and opinions can sometimes come across to foreign business people as direct and straightforward, even to the point where it can appear both tactless and aggressive. Interruptions can appear excessive and tempers can be lost. In reality, none of this is usually deliberately aimed at being disrespectful, simply at testing the strength of the case you are making.

Finally, there is a commonly held perception of France as possessing a somewhat risk-averse national business-culture. In fact, the best of French businesses are anything but risk-averse. However, there is certainly a desire to explore thoroughly all possible sides of an argument and a hesitance to make decisions on the basis of what might be called excessive intuition.

Business Etiquette and Protocol in France

Relationship-building

- As a general rule of thumb it is important to get to know contacts and invest the time to build a personal and trusting relationship, rather than diving straight in with business matters.
- In particular strong personal networks are likely to prove a powerful asset when dealing with conflict and in solving problems on an informal basis.
- As elsewhere whoever issues the invitation to lunch or dinner generally pays. It is a sensible idea to wait for your partner to explicitly bring up the subject of business at lunch, although etiquette allows you to do so just before the dessert arrives. Wine is usually served with food, but there is no obligation to drink at lunchtime if you would prefer not to.

- Gift-giving is not a major part of doing business in France, although giving something small and tasteful as a gesture at the successful conclusion of a deal is unlikely to harm your relationship. Business cards are important and you should have a translation of important information in French on one side of the card.
- French people distinguish clearly between their different spheres of relationships: family, close friends, acquaintances and colleagues. They will tend to have a different approach within each of these spheres. However, these spheres can overlap when the relationship is thriving and it is not unusual to be invited by colleagues for dinner at their home.

Communication:

- There is a great cultural appreciation for good conversationalists in France. Individuals capable of expressing ideas in a lucid and articulate form, preferably in French, are likely to get more done.
- Where possible, come fully prepared to even initial meetings with clear ideas and well thought-through arguments.
- If you are using English take care not to overestimate your contact's level of competence and grade your language appropriately.
- At the very least make sure you know how to pronounce your French contact's name correctly and be aware that it is common in France for people to introduce themselves with their surname first.
- Do not be surprised if important feedback appears to go vertically and not horizontally – individuals from less status-conscious cultures than France may even have problems accessing what they consider to be basic information without going through the appropriate chain of command.
- Having access to information is a key source of power in a French company. Be aware therefore that you can appear odd if you communicate with what the French might perceive as excess transparency.

Meetings:

- Meetings, whether formal or informal, are often a confrontation of ideas, based on a rigorous discussion of each other's points of view, rather than a forum for getting through an agenda. Important decisions are rarely taken during meetings. Rather, the role of the leader

of a meeting is to assess each participant's point of view and to allow delegates an opportunity for expression.

- Make a move to stand up when a contact enters the room, particularly if he or she is at a senior level in the hierarchy.
- Formal titles like Madame or Monsieur are often used during conversations with the use of first names sometimes restricted to closer relationships.
- Formality is also visible in other aspects of business life such as letter writing styles, the seemingly obligatory greetings, handshaking or cheek kissing, the use of the vous (translated into English as “You”) rather than the familiar ‘tu’ form, and the concern for formal business dress. In a similar vein, joking is not a key element of socialising in France, and business people tend to get to know each other first before sharing jokes.
- As a general rule of thumb therefore you should try to find out your contact's hierarchical level and expectations about formality before you meet.
- Inappropriate informality can create the wrong impression and indicate a lack of respect for your contact’s status. Take care not to ask questions that are too personal as French culture tends to draw clear distinctions between work and private life.
- It is also important not to take the strongly expressed opinions of your French counterparts personally. The best way of responding is to be prepared to lose a little of your Anglo-Saxon politeness.

Negotiations:

- Understanding how to influence people means, first and foremost, knowing who does what and who has the authority to take decisions. Employees tend to stick to their job descriptions in France. Work roles, especially at lower levels in the organisation, are clearly defined and in the main only those who have the authority and status actually make decisions. This means decisions are often slow to come by as authority is sought from individuals at higher hierarchical levels.
- Once you have identified the right person, take time to consider the most appropriate way to present your arguments. The French have an intellectual and theoretical approach to business and may need time to express their ideas clearly and understand the reasoning behind yours. In these circumstances the best way to influence decision-making is to come fully prepared to negotiations and presentations, and to spend time responding to complex and rigorous questioning.

- One of the reasons why French negotiators have a reputation for sticking tenaciously to their arguments, even when there is a clear consensus against them amongst counterparts, is their belief that an argument remains undefeated unless the logic behind it is somehow proved faulty.
- In these circumstances French negotiators may come across as quite inflexible. If you can express clear, well thought out and logical opinions, and your argument is sound, you are likely to win in the end. Using personal relationships to reinforce your influence on key decision-makers is also likely to help.
- Bear in mind that a negotiation does not end just because a decision has been announced. Often decisions are contested and can be rearranged informally. Expect meetings to last for longer than might be normal in other cultures.

Socialising:

- Spending time learning French and socialising are essential opportunities to develop the kind of close personal relationships that smooth decision-making and facilitate the exchange of important information. However much you may dislike business lunches, a good general rule is to accept any invitation to attend a business lunch and to think of time spent entertaining as invested, not wasted.

Dress:

- Business dress is understated and stylish.
- Men should wear dark-coloured, conservative business suits for the initial meeting.
- How you dress later is largely dependent upon the personality of the company with which you are conducting business.
- Women should wear either business suits or elegant dresses in soft colours.
- The French like the finer things in life, so wear good quality accessories.

Business hours and appointments

- Most French workers take four or five weeks of holiday in the summer and, with the exception of the tourist industry, French business more or less shuts down in August. Try to conduct business during other months.
- During the rest of the year business hours are from 8.30 or 9.00 am to 6.30 pm or even later.

- The French sometimes perceive schedules as flexible guidelines towards a number of different potential events, and if there is not a clear, explicit and logical reason for a timetable to be kept to, other things may be assigned a higher priority. This can sometimes be quite confusing for those from more schedule-conscious cultures. It may be important to explain to French counterparts what the consequences might be if your deadlines are not respected.

Taboos

- There are very few taboos or off-limit subjects in French business. In France opposition and conflict are often welcomed as a way of testing arguments and the resulting oral communication style can sometimes come across to foreign ears as very direct. This is rarely meant to be personally insulting.
- Managing and working in French teams can be very frustrating for an Anglo-Saxon member as it all too often appears that nobody seems to work together. In fact, it is the team-leader's responsibility to monitor and subsequently assemble all the components of the finished product. Those working in teams with French businesses would be well advised to make explicit their expectations about team behaviour and values. When one particular culture's assumptions are imposed on a multicultural team by default, somebody is likely to feel aggrieved.