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France

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France Communicating

France is the largest country in the Western Europe (the fifth part of European Union). According to its gross domestic product (GDP), France is the fourth economic power in the world. Its leading industries are: transportation, telecommunications, agricultural industry, pharmaceuticals, as well as banking, insurance sectors, and tourism. Besides, the traditional industries of luxury goods (leather goods, garments, perfumes, alcoholic beverages) are very important.

France ranked fourth in the world to attract foreign direct investment. Foreign investors appreciate the skills of the workforce in France, a high level of research, mastery of high technology, financial stability, and control of production costs. That is why it is so important for managers to know how to communicate effectively with people from France. This strong and powerful country has its own way of running the business and the way of thinking about commerce ethics.



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Business Meeting Culture



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"It is not that the French are not profound, but they all express themselves so well that we are led to take their geese for swans."

--Van Wyck Brooks

Planning a Meeting

Meetings in France are not more about business decision-making, but about sharing ideas, listening to the new points of view and debating about considerable amount of topics. These meetings have no clear structure, which is very complicated to partners from more organized countries like Germany, Netherlands etc.

All meetings should be reconfirmed a few days in advance in order to avoid all misunderstandings. As well as foreigners are expected to arrive on time, while French partners can keep them waiting. But that has nothing to do with a lack of enthusiasm; it is just the matter of culture.

Despite this frivolous attitude to time French people are always well aware of the topics they need to talk about. In this case it is important to be very careful with any contradictions as the level of preparation for negotiation of the counterpart is really high.

It is clueless to predict the finish time of negotiations even with an attentively prepared agenda. As French are fond of lively debates, a frequent step aside from a planned route can be expected which is often mainly seen as a restriction.

During a Meeting

From aside, the meeting may look rather formal, as a person in charge sitting in the middle, surrounded by subordinates. A certain small talk is required and can cover topics pleasant for French people, as:

- Wonderful French food and cuisine
- Anything about art, music and philosophy
- French history, sports, and other aspects of the culture if a foreigner knows what he is talking about
- All current events of a global nature
- Architecture, nature and the beautiful French cities and countryside

Apparently, there are conversations to avoid:

- It is bad manners to ask questions about someone's political preferences unless they bring up the topic
- Refrain the standard conversation opener, "What do you do?"
- Do not criticize Napoleon or any other French leader
- Avoid making personal inquiries in conversation, especially during initial introductions
- Praise (rather than criticism) of anything French will go a long way.

As all the formalities of building a relationship of trust are abided, obviously there is a change to get down to business. But (as France is a polite society and plunging into business is considered abrupt and slightly rude), the French counterpart will indicate when it is time to start talking business.

French attitude towards debates is impressive, as nothing can heat atmosphere more than desire to discuss the raised question in very expressive manner. In this case, the person should not be surprised if he is involved in arguing, as it is how the French do the deals. More surprisingly is the fact how they can do a few things at the same time: answering the phone and discussing current issues of the meeting.

Do not be afraid to interrupt or interfere in other discussions because it is surprising how often French do that by themselves. They can be quite straight in their criticism and ability to say strong "no", but, on contrary, they cannot spell out everything that they have in mind, just because it is the priority of listener to interpret it in his/her own way. Policy of finding "the right word" is very common, so it can be pretty complicated for French people to voice opinions in another language as French is very rich on flourish and beautiful expressions.

Moreover, there is a little likelihood of silence during discussion, only if the subject is completely exhausted and illuminated. French prefer to build long lasting relationships, so they will try to establish firm contacts with their partners. But not try to be too friendly as they are suspicious of early amiability.

Because of the chaotic route of the meeting there always is a special person who will summarize all the discussion made so far. Do not immediately try to appoint a new negotiation time, as the numerous of consensus-finding meetings are seen as a weakness. Normally, decisions are made after the whole set of negotiations, so it is essential to keep in mind and on the paper all the aspects in a very detailed way.

Power is essential in French culture that is why all the important decisions are most likely will be made on the top of the company hierarchy. Therefore, the people who are dealing are just potentially intermediates.

Presentations

According to French business etiquette it is familiar to use only first names when invited. Nevertheless, it can happen that some French will start to introduce themselves with their surname first.

It is recommended to learn basic French phrases and use them whenever possible. But inability to fluently speak French should not disturb to do business in France. Even a simple willing to use their mother tongue will be really appreciated as a matter of respect to centuries of history and impact on cultural development worldwide. The French will revert to English if they see someone is floundering.

French people are real lovers of abstract thoughts, philosophy and theory, it clearly shows that they can seem impractical to pragmatic thinkers. Be prepared to answer a lot of questions about politics, economic and historical subjects, as this is the way French can judge a person on his intellect and erudition. Such debates will help to evoke respect in the soles of ones partners.

Make sure that a business proposal is prepared with a great thoroughness as French tend to discuss what is presented in it without requiring further explanations. And regardless of their love towards abstract thoughts, they need to see logic in the goals and statements, as making a deal seen as an intellectual exercise. Give only knowledgeable arguments on subjects.

Linguistics

In business and workplace communications French is ordered by law. Moreover, French government is trying to do the best to further their language worldwide through organizations such as La Francophonie.

Not many people know the fact that French vocabulary was borrowed by English language. Here are some examples of French words that English-speakers use all over:

- adieu "until God". Means "farewell": when someone is not going to see someone until God (when someone dies and find them self on heaven)
- agent provocateur "provocative agent". A person who is going to provoke somebody suspicious into accomplish illegal operation
- aide-mémoire "memory aid"
 1. Memorandum
 2. Something that will help to keep in mind something, for example, crib sheet or mnemonic devices
- apéritif "cocktail" From Latin, "to open"

For the business environment we should not forget either that there are two ways to say «you» in French language «tu» and «vous». If someone calls for several people — it is always «vous». But for single person there are some rules.

«Vous» - is a formal, polite form. It shows consideration to someone. French people always use it with:

- a person that he does not know very well
- an elder person, sometimes even if he says "tu" to him
- a superior person like a boss or a teacher
- a person who would be called Monsieur (Mr.), Madame (Mrs., Ms.), or Mademoiselle (Miss)
- an official (judge, policeman, lawyer)

As for «tu», it is more informal and acquainted. Someone can use it to call:

- a family member

- a child
- a person of the similar age and the same social status of someone (up to 30 years old)
- a close friend
- a member in on-line forums, chats for fun etc.
- a colleague if there is no big difference in hierarchy and the corporate environment (ethics) favours this form of communication
- God
- someone you do not know well, but want to insult or accentuate disrespect

Let's make a short finale insight into French communication style in order to move further with more detailed description of non-verbal appearance.

- The French are verbally expressive. They often initiate debate and engage in heated discussions over dinner or in business meetings. People from less expressive cultures should not perceive it as a sign of hostility or rudeness.
- French people like not completed sentences, so the listeners can fulfil the gaps on their own.
- Simultaneous communication is the common rule in France; normally it is totally okay to interrupt someone if someone have anything to add to the discussing topic.
- Good verbal skills are appreciated a lot as more flourish, skilful presentations will earn more respect from the French partners.
- Searching for the right words is as significant for French, as not losing face for Chinese or Japanese.
- Both verbal and written communications are supplemented with polite phrases and fairly formal, except between family and friends.
- As a rule, French people are not afraid to criticize a point of view but in the workplace, however, employees will be doubtful about contradicting someone with the authority.
- France is what is known as a high-context culture. To put it simply, that acquire certain level of relationship, developed and trustful contacts established.

Non-Verbal Communication

This section of the book is devoted to the brief review of non-verbal and verbal aspects of French communication style for better understanding the business counterparts.

Advice on Non-Verbal Communication

Eye contact

Straight eye contact is perceived as very personal as with strangers it can be considered as the way to establish a relationship. On the other hand it is essential to make a brief eye contact especially with people who need to appear friendly or with those who are helping someone.

Handshake

It is one of the most important parts of any acquaintance as French say they can judge person on the way he/she shakes hands. The best technique is a brief hand shaking with a slight eye contact. Do not forget to shake hands all the time when introducing by hand, leaving or entering negotiation room as it is a common way of greeting each other whoever man or woman.

The double kiss

This style of greeting is referred to close acquaintances as family members, friends and is usually performed starting from the right cheek.

Despite the formality of French business culture, people tend to stand close when speaking to each other. Moreover, touching in public is also commonplace and usually within the bounds of French business etiquette.

Gestures

The five most common gestures are listed below to make someone know how to interpret them in society they are likely to occur.

Un, deux, trois...



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When counting on the fingers, French people begin with the thumb as the number one, then the index finger for the two, and the middle finger for three, etc.

On a sommeil



©Michal Marcol

This gesture has two meanings. It can indicate someone who wants to sleep, or is asleep and does not want to wake.

Put the palms together, place the hands on the shoulder, rest the cheek on the hands. It is possible to close the eyes.

Il est cinglé



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To show that someone is crazy, put the index finger to the temple and turn the hand back and forth.

Rien!



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The "O.K." sign (forming a circle with the thumb and forefinger) actually means "zero" or "useless" in France. The French "O.K." symbol is the "thumbs up", so use this symbol to express approval.

Pardon!



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To apologize or indicate that someone has made a mistake, cover the mouth with the hands.

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Colophon

NUR: 812

First edition 2011

Authors: Petkina Aleksandra, Ekaterina Trofimova

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Editorial team: Emilio Bamio Ares, Jasmijn Camping, Anke de Vries, Santhuruu Nadesapillai, Sander Schroevers

Inner design: Jaguar Print, Hoofddorp

Cover design: Farhana Faroque

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