



Hogeschool van Amsterdam
University of Applied Sciences



France

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Meeting styles 

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Introduction France

France or The Republic of France, a country known for its famous city Paris, the Eiffel Tower and cheese.

The country populates more than 63 million people. French language is not only their official language, but also that of 29 other countries. France is a proud nation. The people of France love their country, culture, education, language and history and are not afraid to show their pride to the world. Since 1789, France has changed its government form as in five republics, two empires and two constitutional monarchies. Although, French people may seem a bit arrogant with showing their pride, one cannot deny that they have won most of the Nobel prizes for literature.

The most common stereotype about French people is about how rude they are. This is due to fact that people do not understand their personality and culture. French people are definitely not the same as for example American or Chinese. This is probably because they virtually know nothing about many other countries as their educational system teaches little of the history or geography of small nations or those that belonged to empires other than their own. A good example of what is seen as "rudeness" is that they do not smile when they meet you, unless they really mean it. You can greet them with your biggest smile, because you think this is polite but for the French this is not the same. They won't smile back unless they like you. Also, you can't assume that every Frenchman speaks English. France is very proud of its language and they expect you to speak at least a little bit of French. So when you're visiting France learn some words like "bonjour", "s'il vous plait", "merci" and as many polite terms as possible.

When doing business with France, keep in mind that the French have a very vertical business structure. They have a strong leader at the top and everybody knows their role within the company. The French have a very polite society with strict etiquette. Their language is a very formal language with "vous" and "tu" as the polite and familiar forms. Though, meetings may appear heated and full of debate.

Meeting styles in France

When you are having a meeting with French people for business it's important that you don't forget to reconfirm it a few days beforehand by phone or e-mail. Something else to take into account when you're scheduling a meeting with them is that you should not book into a tight schedule. It might happen that you've booked a meeting for one hour but in reality this could last longer than you've predicted. The more south the direction you're heading in France, the less importance of punctuality is. Therefore do not be insulted if your French counterpart shows up late.

When your French business partners arrive and the meeting starts, take into account that France is a society that is very polite. Therefore talking about business immediately is considered to be a bit rude.

Meetings usually start with small talk and progressively move on to talking about business. Your French counterpart will start. The meetings in France have in contrary to meetings in other countries no specific goal. They are mostly meant to listen to each other's individual point of view, exchanging ideas and draw conclusions by debating the topics. At the end of a meeting there's no final decision made. This is because top-management wants to take their time in decision-making.

During the meeting you'll see cell phones ringing or having meetings within the meeting. The French area is polychromic and that's why they do many things at once. Meetings can be chaotic and after the meetings they often do not come to a conclusion or decision as mentioned before. Therefore it is smart that there will be one person appointed at the beginning of the meeting that will take notes and summarize it at the end. Also do not try to schedule another meeting because French people will view it as consensus building, which is a weakness.

Interview summary

On the 25th of April 2012 we arranged an interview with Mr. Laurent Stomboli, teacher of Human Resource Management at Hogeschool van Amsterdam (HvA). This interview will provide you knowledge about how French people think and are in general and business context.

In the past French people didn't know how to speak English this is because they are not so adaptable and feel that they are superior compared to other countries. Another reason why they never respond in English to you when you for example are lost while driving from Holland to the campsite in Marseille, is because they simply know that their knowledge of English is not sufficient enough. This will lead to making mistakes if they do try to answer your question and make a fool out of themselves.

It is seen as 'losing face' if you fail in front of others. People are frightened to say something stupid, they are taught from childhood on to first think and then speak rather than speak bluntly and say something ignorant. Therefore also in business context you should never show your weak side to your environment.

In an unequal country as France it is normal that you show your status and it will be noticed by the way you look and it's very important thus showing your emotions is a no-go in business life. For example if you ever encounter a scene where you would love to yell because you're angry, my advice: please try to remain calm. This is called professionalism. If you do lose your anger, your French counterpart will not appreciate your attitude and think that you can't control your feelings in other words you are unprofessional.

The first thing you should do when you've got an appointment for a business meeting with someone of France is to provide them with information about yourself and the company you work for, before the meeting. If you don't they will do the research themselves. Giving them information beforehand gives them the impression that you are long term oriented. Knowing a little bit of French is much appreciated as it indicates that you are interested to build a long term relationship with them. Gaining their trust will help you to be successful when doing business in

France

France. Something to point out is that be careful to not make mistakes because this can mean the end of your relationship.

Now, back to expressing your emotions. As mentioned before, it is not professional to show your emotions at work. Private and work manners are separated in France. If you disagree with someone you should try to bring the message in a diplomatic way with a soft undertone.

The presentation during a business meeting will be done by the person who is accountable for the decision. Meetings usually start with small talk and without an agenda, it's very lively by debates and there is little structure. Therefore it is recommended to appoint a person (or chairperson if available) to make minutes of the meeting. When people fail to reach to an agreement it is common that senior executives intervene.

The best decision in the eyes of France is when it has been taken in a rational way. The presentation its' function is to demonstrate the problem. Decisions never contain how it's going to be implemented this is up to the team managers to decide. Business meetings in France never have the objective to make a decision at the end. This decision will be decided by the top management as it's a centralized society.

Survey summary

After carefully researching the French meeting style via a survey filled in by French business people we have summarized the outcome below.

Info respondents

All survey respondents were of French nationality. They work in international companies, which have their headquarters in France and The United States. 33% of the respondents work in the industry business and 66,6% in other businesses such as Telecom. Among others their job titles were IT Manager, Human Resource Manager and Recruiter.

French meeting style

French people like to meet once a week preferably on Monday morning or any other day during lunch time. Almost all meetings start with small talk and generally last between one or two hours.

There is always a chairperson

present and he or she has a lot of influence and is also responsible for the minutes.

There is no fixed seating in the meeting room, therefore everybody can sit where they want. Except for the chairperson he or she sits at the head of the table. French people are professional; therefore the dress code for meetings is quite formal.

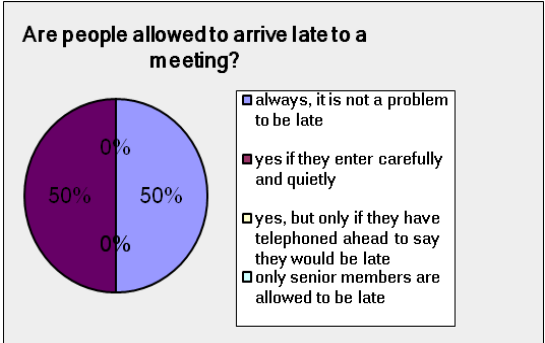
Issues can be discussed in different orders, but are mostly handled in the order as determined in the agenda, which is drafted before the meeting. It could also depend on the influence of the chairperson, which is often a lot.

Answer options	Response percentage
Less than 15 minutes	0,0%
Between 15 and 29 minutes	0,0%
Between 1 hour and 1 ½ hours	66,7%
Between 1 ½ hours and 2 hours	33,3%
More than 2 hours	0,0%

In which order are issues usually discussed?

Answer options	Response percentage
In the order as determined in the agenda which was drafted Before the meeting	33,3%
In order of importance, as agreed on during the meeting itself	33,3%
In a random order	0,0%
In the order as proposed by the chairperson	33,3%
In some other order, namely:	0,0%

PowerPoint presentations are used to support the presenter and include five to ten slides, but it also depends on the audience and the subject. Hand-outs of the presentation are usually not supplied unless asked for, since the presentation is for supporting purposes only. During meetings the most authoritative people in the meeting make the decisions. However, most of the decisions are made after the meeting when everything is discussed. French people like to take their time with making decisions. They are naturally a bit suspicious and risk avoiding. Therefore, they will consider every possible outcome before making the final decision. When a decision is made it cannot be changed. Low-ranking employees and junior employees can interrupt during a meeting if it is done respectfully. As for arriving late, it is also acceptable for employees of all rankings unless entering carefully and quietly.



Generally, meals are not served in relation to meetings, however if it does occur they are served during meetings and they will probably take place in a restaurant.

Furthermore, French people differ about humour during meetings, a large percentage said it was common and not a problem, while another large percentage said it was allowed, but not encouraged.

Chapter 3: Patterns of information sharing

Education is of great importance French people. Therefore, their business culture and way of information sharing is significantly influenced by their educational system. These influences are characterized by value of logical and statistical information presented with lots of figures, supported by detailed background information, which is also thoroughly analysed. Therefore the outcome will be logical and helpful for discussions and decisions.

The French seem strict and focussed, but they also have another side. Their logical and philosophical way of thinking moves them to rather use concepts and principles instead of facts. This gives them the opportunity to find general patterns in complex information.

Sharing information within a company is restricted and unequally distributed. The French have a fairly strong vertical hierarchal system. Information is addressed to top-management and will likely stay there. Furthermore, it is uncommon to share company information outside its surroundings. However, if information is exchanged it will be done so through meetings.

Chapter 4: Display of emotions

French people are quite expressive in their behaviour and talking. Therefore business meetings in France always go along with heated debates. It would be quite strange actually, if there were no signs of discussions. They see disagreements, debates and discussions as exciting, whereas consensus is seen as boring and a weakness. Having good debating skills is an indicator that you have had good education, you are intelligent and know how to behave. When you are in a meeting with French businesspeople do not be afraid to argue along. They simply are interested in your way of thinking and want to know the point of view from every individual.

Although French people are known for being expressive, topics like failures and blaming people are sensitive. It is suggested to remain calm in situations when a conflict occurs. Losing your anger in front of others is perceived as uneducated and unprofessional. If disagreements or conflicts are encountered it is best avoided with an indirect approach while solving conflicts is more direct. Dealing with conflicts will be handled by a manager who will give his final judgment. This should be respected, as it is the decision of an authoritative person.

Chapter 5: The role of authority

French meetings are chaotic and rarely follow a strict agenda. The most important task of the chairman is to begin with a small talk and end with summarizing the most important discussed issues. Arriving late and having long discussions about subjects that are not mentioned in the agenda frequently occurs as well as, interrupting each other and having a small meeting in the meeting itself.

The French are well prepared and you can assume that they will criticize everything point or subject they are unsure about. They believe that they are superior to other nationalities and as long as their logic is not defeated, the French will stick to their point of view. Fierce debates are often and can take much time even if they agree with your point of view. During meetings no final decisions will be made. French people like to take their time, therefore decisions will be made after careful consultation and deliberation.

Hierarchy is very important for the French. That expresses itself during a meeting when an important senior is present. When there is not an important senior figure, people will feel free to have side conversations and even leave the meeting.

Chapter 6: Reasoning styles

Nowadays cross-cultural contact occurs often in the workplace, whether it is communicating by daily encounters for example: phone, fax, Skype or meetings. In the international business world is it not always easy to communicate or establish a relationship with an international counterpart, who has a significant different culture than your own. Therefore is it always helpful and almost crucial to study your counterpart's culture to find out what their way of thinking and communicating is. French people for instance have a totally different way of doing compared to Dutch people. In this chapter communicating, thinking and reasoning of French people in meetings will be further elaborated.

When one meets his French business partner for the first time they should bear in mind that they are naturally a bit suspicious. French people are risk avoiding and therefore very attentive and reticent when meeting someone for the first time. For instance, if you want something, they will first answer with "Non" or "C'est impossible" and after trying harder and getting familiar with them they will slowly move towards a "Yes" (Brooks Peterson, 2004, part3). This is because French people like to build a relationship first. They would like to get to know someone before doing business with them.

When you've become acquainted with your French business partner he or she will judge your character mostly by your education. The French value education and find it easy to define your character based on your educational background. French people pride themselves for their educational system and their complex language. People with a high education and knowledge of the French language will gain respect and French people will be more open to their opinions.

Meetings in France are to exchange ideas. French people like to explore every different point of view on a matter mainly because, they are risk avoiding and like to make several different outcomes for a situation. They have been taught to do so from an early age. French people are also known for being philosophic. They like logical and abstract reasoning and thinking rather than they like hard facts. In meetings, French people will like to go into an intellectual debate where they can show their achieved knowledge. Showing knowledge is seen as strength and is respected in the eyes of French people. Debates and discussion are often accompanied with emotions. French people are known for being expressive and complex, "a French person might vigorously protest and interrupt you during a

conversation with “Je ne suis pas d’accord!” (“I totally disagree!”) (Brooks Peterson, 2004, Part 5). It is important to disagree during a conversation. Disagreeing can show that you are actively listening and that you are thinking carefully about what you are hearing. When French people disagree, they often make a good point one that you might not have considered yet.

Appendix

Interview details + survey results

- Laurent Stomboli
- PhD student at the Cnam-Lirsa in Paris
- Laurent has worked, among other jobs, as a HRM Senior Consultant for various employers in Paris and as a Recruitment and HRD Officer at Accenture in Paris and London. He currently works as a lecturer on Organizations and HRM at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences.



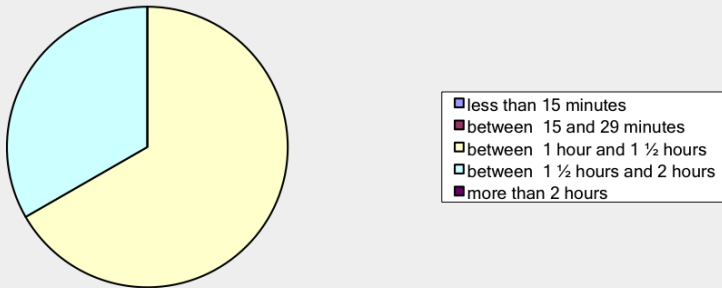
Survey results

Meeting Styles in Europe

Which line of business are you in?	
Answer options	Response percentage
Retail	0,0%
Industry	33,3%
Construction	0,0%
Government	0,0%
Financial services	0,0%
Other, namely:	66,7%

Business meetings generally start with	
Answer options	Response percentage
small talk	100,0%
a discussion about the structure of the meeting	0,0%
a discussion about the minutes of the last meeting	0,0%
a discussion about the first current agenda item	0,0%
a meal	0,0%
other, please explain:	0,0%

A typical meeting lasts:



I participate in meetings

Answer options	Response percentage
more than once a week	33,3%
once a week	66,7%
once every two weeks	0,0%
once a month	0,0%
once every three months	0,0%
once every half year	0,0%
less than once every half year	0,0%

Is a meal (e.g. lunch or dinner) generally served in connection with the meeting?

Answer options	Response percentage
Yes	33,3%
No	66,7%

If yes, when does the meal take place in relation to the meeting?

Answer options	Response percentage
Before	0,0%
During	100,0%
After	0,0%

Are PowerPoint presentations normally used during business meetings in your organisation/company?

Answer options	Response percentage
Yes	100,0%

No	0,0%
If yes, how many slides do they include on average:	33,3%

Are handouts distributed amongst the participants at the meeting?

Answer options	Response percentage
Yes	0,0%
No	100,0%

In which order are issues usually discussed?

Answer options	Response percentage
In the order as determined in the agenda which was drafted Before the meeting	33,3%
In order of importance, as agreed on during the meeting itself	33,3%
In a random order	0,0%
In the order as proposed by the chairperson	33,3%
In some other order, namely:	0,0%

What are the different roles during a meeting? Multiple answers are possible:

Answer options	Response percentage
Chairperson	100,0%
Minutes secretary	66,7%
Time-keeper	0,0%
No roles are defined	0,0%
Another role:	0,0%

Is there a fixed seating arrangement during the meeting?

Answer options	Response percentage
Yes	0,0%
No	100,0%

Local meeting terminology

Agenda:	Ordre du jour
Chairperson:	Président
Minute secretary:	Secrétaire
Date and Venue:	Date et lieu/L'heure et le lieu
To attend:	Participer
Apologies for absence:	Excusé(es)/Absence excusée
Any other business:	Divers
Agenda item number one:	Premier sujet
Manager:	Le Responsable
Meeting:	Réunion
Welcome:	Bienvenue à tout le monde

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