

# Do Germans and Americans Understand Each Other?

Two economies intertwined. Allies within Nato. Shared linguistic, cultural and religious roots. Countless personal and familial connections. If we're honest with ourselves, however, Germans and Americans think and act differently. In areas key to the success of their cooperation. Just one topic. Persuasion. Let's reflect, if only briefly.

## Objective

The Germans separate message and messenger. Content takes center stage. Arguments should speak for themselves. Americans link message and messenger. Content, form and presenter form a unity. "Sell yourself first, then your product or service." Germans are wary of the American approach, suspecting personality distracting from weak arguments. Americans find the Germans impersonal and distanced: "Why should I be persuaded, when the presenter isn't even persuaded?"



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of a given situation is understood by Americans as pessimistic, negative, at times destructive.

## Analytical

Germans are systematic in their thinking. Complexity is grasped by utilizing theories and models to understand how component parts interrelate. Americans break down complexity into its component parts, focus on the essential, in order to take action. Americans are sceptical of too much theory, arguing instead with facts and experience. Facts and experience, without a convincing description of the big picture, do not persuade Germans. To concentrate on key variables only means overlooking important aspects. Americans are seen as superficial and over-simplifying. The German inclination to paint the big picture can make a professorial and arrogant impression on American ears,

## Competent

Germans comprehend problems as problems. Competent is he who identifies and understands the problem, then recommends its solution. Americans strive to see problems as opportunities. Competent is she who is able to maximize the gains they offer. Hastily interpreting a problem as an opportunity signals to Germans an inability to recognize the seriousness of the situation. Americans can appear naive. The German focus on the weak points

comprehensiveness as long-winded, overly complicating and impractical. Americans become impatient.

### Realistic

For Germans, if reality is the present, to understand the present, is to understand how it became such. To be realistic is to understand the past. For Americans, to be realistic is to understand what is possible. The possible is determined by present circumstances and by the ability to shape a new present, a future present. To be realistic is to envision a future. American visions are often perceived as not grounded in an accurate understanding of the status quo. They want to move forward without first establishing their starting point. German overemphasis on the present as a product of the past is seen as backward-looking. A vision of the future, forward movement, necessarily means moving away from the past.

### Persuasive

In Germany, to persuade is to inform persuasively. The line of argumentation guides an audience to its logical conclusion. Selling the conclusion is not necessary. In the U.S., to persuade is to sell persuasively. Persuasive argumentation leads the audience to a choice. The audience is asked to make a choice. From the

German perspective, Americans sell, put on a show, do not persuade. Information is not presented in a professional way. The audience is confronted with either buying or rejecting. From the American perspective, Germans only inform, give academic lectures, don't sell. The audience is left hanging.

### Why reflect?

Why enter into dialogue with each other, as Germans and Americans, about subtle differences in inclinations, approaches, in logics, in ways of thinking? Simple. If we persuade differently, there'll be consequences, some positive, some less so. The dangers: A persuasive message, which comes across clearly in the one business culture and should lead to necessary action, suddenly does not reach its target audience in the other. Decisions made with broad consequences, judged by the one logic to be persuasive and therefore legitimate, are viewed by the other as suboptimal, perhaps even unjust. The misperceptions create friction and mistrust. Both sides accuse the other of being political. The fundamental willingness to be persuaded declines rapidly, and with it the performance of the entire organization. **GAT**



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