



MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

# HOW DO GERMANS TICK?

## Intercultural Handbook Germany



# A very warm welcome to Germany!

When we hear about Germany, several different pictures come to our minds: the Oktoberfest, Lederhosen, beer, Beethoven and Bach, high quality cars, Schloss Neuschwanstein, World War II as well as the difficulty to get into closer contact with the German people. Those are all clichés about the country and its people which may be wrong or right. Yet, whoever takes a look behind those stereotypes can discover a country that is full of diversity.

Nowadays, Germany is the world's fifth largest economy and the largest in Europe. The economical dynamics are mainly a result of the country's strength in exports. Germany today faces the same difficulties as many other industrialised countries: the financial crisis and the demographic change are major issues. Germans describe their economic system as a "social market economy" – providing an array of social services, while encouraging competition and free-enterprise are challenges.

Just as varied as the German industry is its culture. Intercultural competence and a deep understanding of cultural diversity are the keys to success in international business. Different ways of behavior as well as ways of thinking can easily lead to misunderstandings. As a golden rule: Always be open in dealing with foreign cultures, their customs and traditions. The Intercultural Handbook Germany does not want to enforce any stereotypes, but identify tendencies that may apply to a larger share of the German population, but of course not to all.

We wish you an interesting and helpful reading!



## AGENDA

- 1. What is culture?**
- 2. German cultural standards & values**
- 3. Business life**
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# 1. What is culture?



"A fish only realizes it needs water to live when it is no longer swimming in water.  
Our culture is to us like water to the fish.  
We live and breathe through our culture."

Dr. Fons Trompenaars

Today, various definitions of culture exist. We would like to introduce you to the most common ones in modern intercultural studies.

The word "culture" comes from the Latin verb "colere" which stands for the cultivation of soil and plants. It first appeared in the 17th century. Culture stood for things created by man's own will and skill.

### **Edward T. Hall**

"Cultures are unified wholes in which everything interrelates. Any culture is primarily a system for creating, sending, storing and processing information. Communication underlies everything."

According to Hall, 80 to 90% of communication are not language, but words, material things and behaviour.

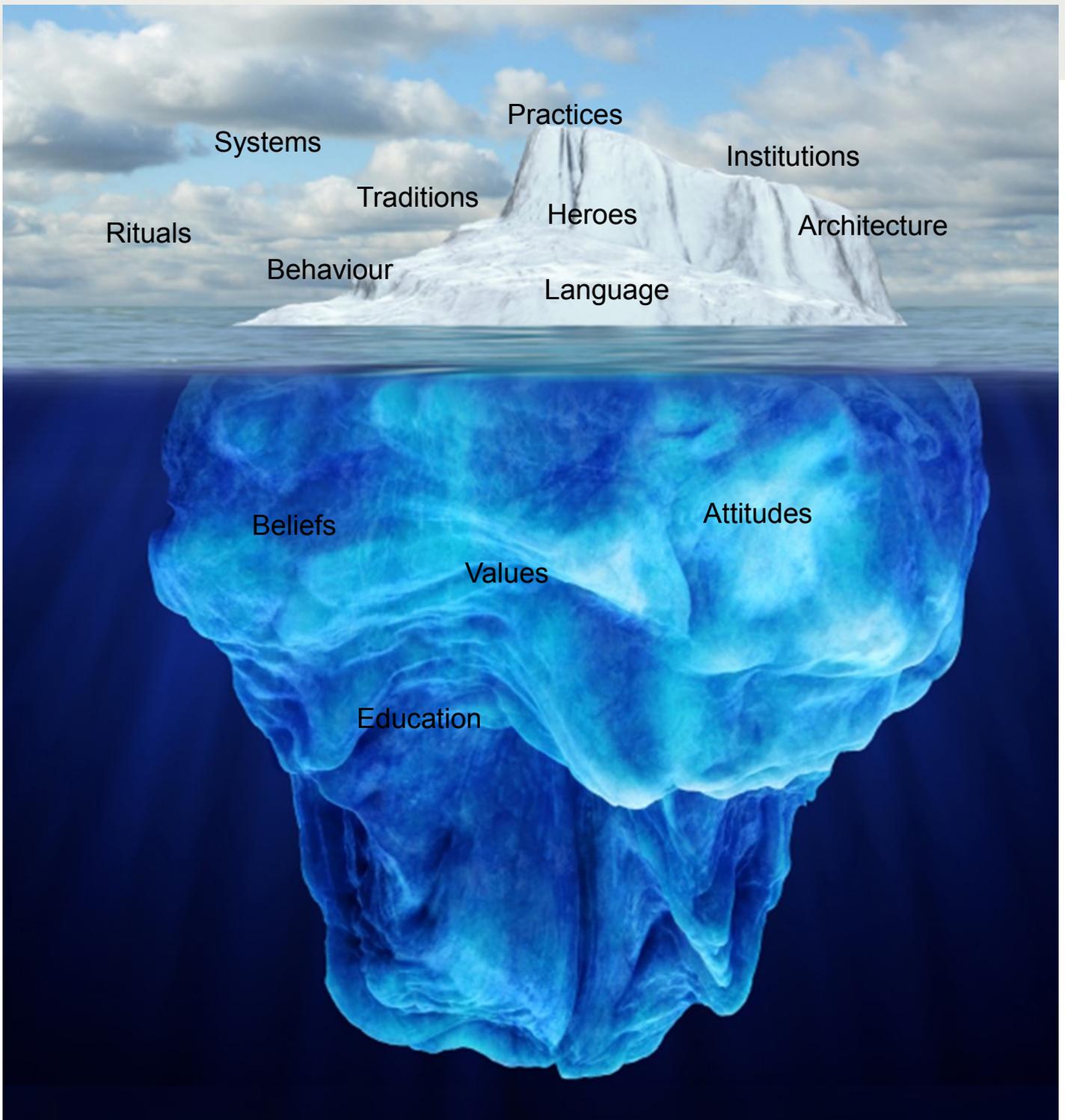
### **Fons Trompenaars, Geert Hofstede**

"Culture is the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas."

# The cultural iceberg

When we see an iceberg, the portion which is visible above water is, in reality, only a small piece of a much larger whole. Similarly, people often think of culture as the numerous observable characteristics of a group that we can "see" with our eyes, be it their food, dances, music, arts or greeting rituals. The reality, however, is that these are merely an external manifestation of the deeper and broader components of culture — the complex ideas and deeply-held preferences and priorities known as attitudes and values.

Deep below the "water line" are a culture's core values. These internal forces become visible to the casual observer in the form of observable behaviors, such as the words we use, the way we act, the laws we enact, and the ways we communicate with each other. It is also important to note that the core values of a culture do not change quickly or easily. They are passed on from generation to generation by numerous institutions which surround us.



2.

## German cultural standards & values



# What do other Nations think about Germans?

## **Positive things**

- Diligence
- Correctness
- Punctuality
- Tidiness
- Quality
- Honesty
- Reliability

## **Negative things**

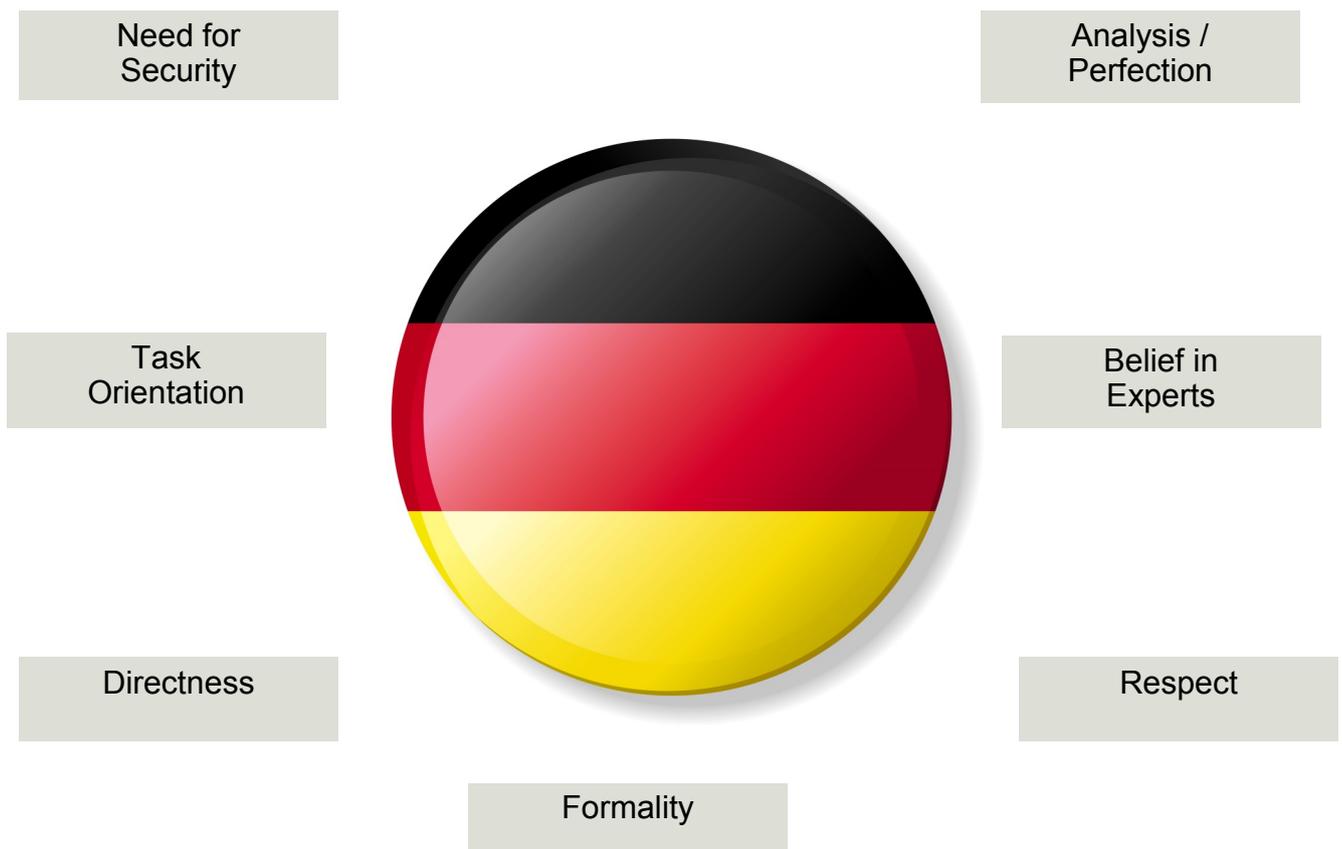
- Perfectionism
- Stubbornness
- Inflexibility
- No sense of humor
- Know-it-alls
- Unfriendliness
- Reserved behavior
- Stiffness

# German values

- Commitment
- Directness
- Honesty
- Clarity
- Structure
- Rationality
- To go into something in depth
- Education, training
- Quality work
- Self responsibility
- Environmental consciousness
- Friendship, family
- Privacy, "Gemütlichkeit"
- Awareness of one's obligations
- Security

# The German mentality

Important aspects



# German cultural standards

Task orientation

Motivation for actions: facts, circumstances,  
control of emotions

Appreciation  
of structures and  
rules

Narrow interpretation of laws and rules

Time  
management

Systematic, long-term planning

Separation of  
life spheres

Strict separation of private and work life

Internal control

Guilt culture, self control through existing rules

Sense of an  
abstract "common  
good"

Everybody has to carry out his / her duty to make the hole  
system work

Explicit and direct  
communication, low  
context

Very direct and explicit communication, little reading  
between the lines

# Passion for finding solutions

- Good results are more important than fast results
- Many Germans tend to be perfectionists and search for a 100% solution / quality
- "Made in Germany" – synonym for quality products
- Understand the problem first, then solve it
- In conflicts: finding the guilty party
- Getting to the core of a subject



# German business values

<b>Value</b>	<b>Behaviour</b>	<b>External view</b>
Punctuality	Keeping deadlines, not letting someone wait	Inflexible, impatient
Security	Financial and other risks covered by insurance	Over-anxious, dislike risks, in- flexible
Privacy, Individualism	Building friendships slowly; preserving distance at first; separation of job and private sphere	Emotional distance, cold, sel- fish, lack of humour, serious
Discipline, Diligence, Reli- ability, Accountability	"Do it 100% or not at all", high-quality work, perfectionism	Workaholics, inflexible, arrogant, to be a know-it-all
Straightforwardness, Honesty	Clear statements	Aggressive, undiplomatic, crude

# Honesty & commitment – What does it mean?

- Being able to "look someone in the eye"
- Commitment and reliability are as important as professional competence to create trust and respect
- A lack of trust makes cooperation and personal relationships impossible

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

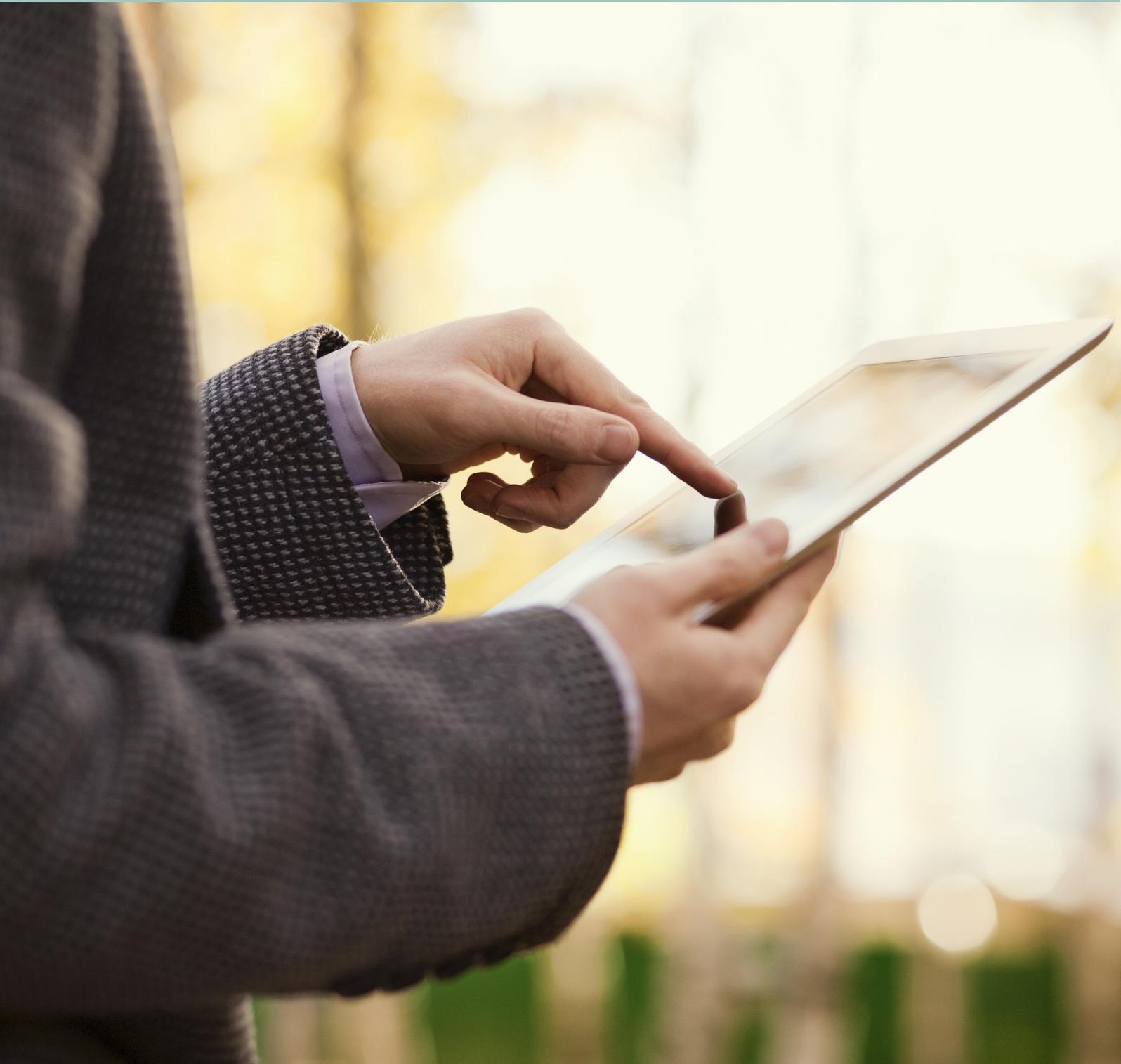
- Germans associate a firm handshake and steady eye contact with confidence, commitment and proactivity
- Communicate in a straightforward manner: A "yes" is a "yes" and a "no" has to be openly communicated
- Communicate problems, uncertainties and doubts early
- Be punctual and stick to deadlines
- Don't cancel appointments last minute
- See a contract / decision / agreement etc. as something fixed and binding
- Accept being criticized; taking responsibility for one's actions is considered professional behavior

# The German way of thinking

- Love abstract concepts
- Theories and models are valued
- Critical reflection
- Transfer knowledge
- Call things into question, Think something through
- Discussions: personal and factual matters are separated
- "Brainstorming"
- Debates can be heated
- Structuring tasks by priority
- Objective thinking and analysing on the job
- Organizing
- Aversion to ambiguity and contradictions
- Task-orientation
- Appreciation of rules, regulations and structures
- Rule-oriented, internalized control
- Time planning
- Separation of private and professional life
- Low-context communication style

# 3.

## Business life



# 3.1

## Building trust

### **In relationship-oriented cultures:**

- Quality of the relationship
- Person thinks of how to perform his / her actions
- Search for common interests
- Care for and maintenance of the relationship is important
- Flexibility and freedom

### **In task-oriented cultures:**

- Quality of the product
- Person thinks of what actions to perform
- Sympathy between the players is "nice to have" but not essential; reliability is more important
- "Sticking to the topic"
- Structure / stability



# 3.2

## Greetings and address

In Germany, it is customary to greet people by shaking hands (regardless of the gender) and looking the other person directly in the eyes. The common forms of greeting are "Guten Morgen" (up until approx. 10-11am) and "Guten Tag" (after 11am). More casual forms are "Hallo" and "Hi". You take your leave by saying "Auf Wiedersehen" or, amongst friends, "Tschüss". Only between friends, kisses on the cheeks and hugs are becoming more and more popular, although there are no set rules of etiquette.

As a basic rule, people in Germany address each other on a surname-basis and with the formal address of "you", i.e. "Sie". Germans, including close colleagues who share an office, often continue using the formal "Sie".

The use of "Du" is generally proposed by the older or more senior of the two people concerned.

When addressing people with academic titles, there are also rules about whether these should be included or omitted. In Germany, the title "Doctor" or "Professor" is essentially part of a person's name and should also be included in the form of address. Such titles should be used directly adjacent to the name, e.g. "Frau Professor X" or "Herr Doktor X".

The title may only be omitted if "in official situation" specifically requested by the person who is to be addressed. The normal form of address is always "Herr" or "Frau", followed by the surname.



# 3.3

## Business contacts

The German style of thinking is often deductive, i.e. the solution for a specific problem is deduced from a general principle. Germans initially tend to begin with a general statement about the nature of the problem, continue with a systematic analysis of the objectives and carefully weigh up the alternatives, so that they can then – after ample deliberation – decide on the best option under the given circumstances. They often do not take action until the rationale is flawless and a logical conclusion is the only thing that can be deduced from it.

For Germans, life consists of two largely separate areas: their public (professional) life and their private life. In public, cool correctness is the order of the day. In private, people like to be easy-going and informal. As a foreigner you will initially only get glimpses of the public Germany. Once you are in the inner circle of a German person, you will probably have gained a friend for life.

As already mentioned, it is appreciated in Germany if people speak their minds and frankly defend what they think. This also applies to criticism and feedback. It is perfectly normal to pass judgement on what another person is doing and to be blunt when raising objections. Honest feedback is not only expected but also appreciated, as people see it as an opportunity to improve their own performance. Direct criticism is not regarded as a personal "attack", but as a clear and unambiguous comment related exclusively to the individual's work – although here, too, a polite, matter-of-fact approach is, of course, still expected.

# 3.4

## Team work and leadership

A meeting without an agenda is a very rare event in Germany. The sequence in which contributions are made to discussions does not necessarily have to be in order of hierarchical seniority. What is expected – and provided – are sound, purely factual contributions. Wild gesticulation or discussions conducted in an aggressive manner are not appreciated.

From a German perspective, presentations should be prepared in multimedia form with particular attention to detail (visual format, exact numbers): the current situation is analysed, options are presented and, ideally, at the end concrete recommendations or instructions are provided. Key information is summarised in writing in the form of hand-outs / presentation packs, etc. Jokes, cartoons and the like are largely seen as unnecessary distractions.

A feature of task-oriented societies such as Germany is that its members are particularly focussed on the outcome during negotiations. As achieving objectives is very important, only a concrete outcome is seen as a success, and results are expected to be achieved by the end of the meeting. If there is time left after business has been dealt with, this is the time to take care of building relationships. However, one thing is certainly important before any deal can be closed: German business people need to have the feeling that they are in possession of all the relevant information (background facts, figures, market analyses, etc.). It is not usual to criticise competitors – the product should speak for itself.

# 3.5

## Business dress

The type of clothing is dependent on a given person's position within the company. However, value is undoubtedly attached to dressing correctly and appropriately, without attracting attention. In general the dress code is quite modest – people have a slight fear of appearing bigger than they really are. In terms of choosing discrete forms of dress, for men it is usually expected to display a well-groomed appearance and, depending on their position and the industry they are in, wear either work clothes or a dark suit with an appropriate, inconspicuous tie. The dominant colours at boardroom level are blue, grey, black and brown. A female employee's outfit should neither be too elegant nor too chic. In general, the rule for women is only to wear skirts or dresses that come down to at least just over the knee. Plunging necklines should also be avoided and very high or spike heels are rarely seen in German offices.



# 3.6

## Communication

Communication is an essential part of interaction, so this dimension necessarily overlaps with the other dimensions which all involve communication. There are significant differences, however, in how directly or indirectly members of different cultures express themselves. This is particularly noticeable in how people give instructions and convey criticism.

In cultures with a preference for direct communication, people are expected to take a clear position and openly express their opinion, even if it involves criticism or confrontation. On the other hand, other cultures avoid directly expressing opinions.

Germany is one of the so-called "low-context" cultures. All details are transmitted explicitly. This means that Germans tend to pay more attention to the literal meaning of words than to the context surrounding them. Messages are transmitted more by words than nonverbal signals. If in doubt, a German will ask a follow-up question in order to get all of the information, even if this could perhaps have been deduced implicitly.



# 3.7

## Perception of hierarchy

Different cultures have different ways of dealing with the perceived distance between the powerful and the powerless. Although social inequality can be found everywhere, there are significant variations in how people respond to it.

In cultures with a low-level perception of hierarchy, people try to minimize social differences and strive for equality. In cultures with a high-level perception of hierarchy, differences in status are accepted as the norm, especially by those with lower status or position.

Contrary to the widespread stereotype, hierarchical thinking in Germany is relatively unpronounced. Authority is not accepted per se, but is derived from a person's competence and personality. A manager fulfils a functional role within an organisation, generally that of someone who delegates tasks. This is accepted without being questioned as long as the manager shows through his or her ability and commitment that he or she is up to the job. Hierarchies tend to be flat with the boss tending to embody the idealised character of a "primus inter pares", involving his staff in decisions. It is for this reason that business cards are handed over in a rather relaxed fashion in Germany. Germans take it for granted that anyone sent out to represent their company is regarded as being authorised to act on its behalf and qualified for the task at hand, regardless of their position in the company according to their business card.

Understatement also belongs to the modest power divide in Germany. Pretentious behaviour or making a show of power (or wealth) is not welcome, i.e. those in positions of power act as though they are less powerful than they really are.

# 3.8

## Time management

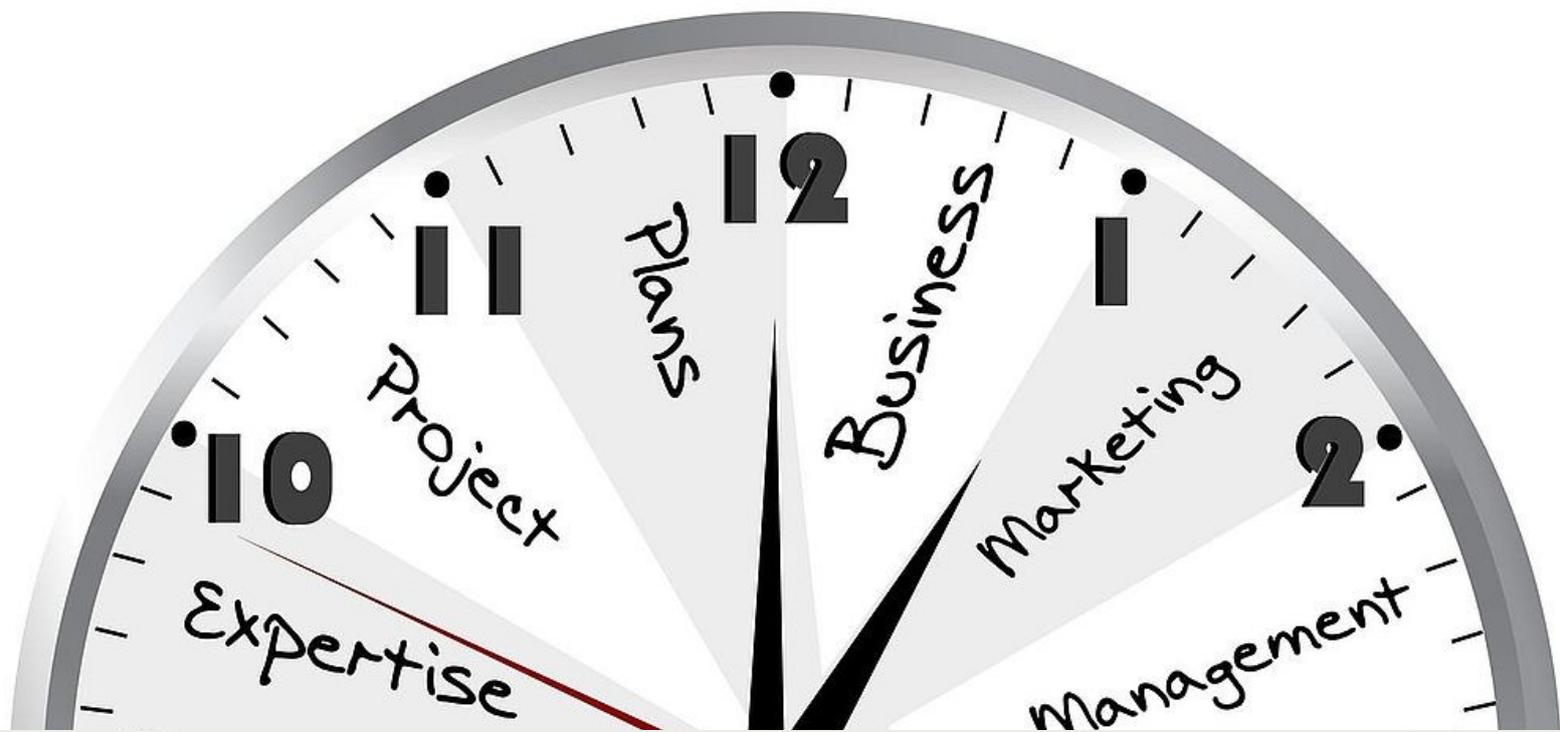
The pace of life as well as management and perception of time varies widely from culture to culture. Different attitudes towards time in everyday life can potentially lead to intercultural misunderstandings amongst business partners.

Single-focused time cultures tend to plan tasks in a linear way, while in multi-focused time cultures the timing of tasks to be carried out depends far more on the person.

In German culture, time is seen as a firmly fixed concept. This leads to linear scheduling, whereby jobs are worked through step-by-step, one after the other and it is extremely rare to do different jobs at the same time. The entire scheduling process is oriented around the job and the primary focus is not on the person doing it but on the outcome.

Therefore, essential elements for such planning include fixed dates and deadlines which are adhered to as precisely as possible. Distractions and interruptions – no matter what sort – are perceived as extremely disruptive. Linear time planning also requires a high degree of punctuality. The maximum period of lateness that is generally accepted is a quarter of an hour, although this can be also seen as impolite – even in private life.

In terms of their perception of time, Germans are less focussed on the present than other nations. They are conscious of their past but oriented towards the future. The past plays a major role and people live with a very pronounced awareness of history. Focussing on the future, however, is also of key significance. Looking after the elderly (state pensions, etc.) is perceived by the public as an important topic and companies often plan for and invest into this well in advance. Reinvesting profit is usually preferred to taking short-term financial gain. Holidays are often planned many months in advance.



Occasion	Tolerance	Announcement will be...
Business meeting	Arriving 5 minutes before, punctual	"um"
Private meeting	5 minutes late are tolerable	"um"
Private invitation for dinner	5-15 minutes late are usually OK	"um"
Private invitation for a party	Anytime starting with the appointed time is OK	"ab"

# 3.9

## Task orientation

What is more important in business negotiations? To create a pleasant working climate, or to be matter-of-fact and deal with issues as promptly and efficiently as possible? In some cultures, people concentrate primarily on the task to be completed, while in others creating and maintaining a good relationship amongst the individuals involved is the main focus.

In some cultures, people "live in order to work". First comes work – business before pleasure. At the other end of the scale are cultures in which work is not an end in itself. People "work in order to live" and maintaining good interpersonal relations is a priority. Germans are regarded as being rather task oriented. All parties concerned should derive clear benefits from working together. The focus is on the deal and, as a rule, personal relationships arise only once business matters have been agreed.

Germany shows clear elements of an individualist society. Compared to many other countries, for example, an individual in Germany has a relatively strong position vis-à-vis the group. People tend to be more interested in dealing with their own concerns, giving priority to their personal objectives and being inclined to highlight their own achievements and success. A strong personality and self-assurance are perfectly respectable character traits. Private and business matters are kept separate. Asking colleagues personal questions is only advisable after you have known them for a long time, as they can very quickly view this as an undue intrusion into their private life. The individualistic orientation of Germans can also be seen in the standard family structure, which is typically a "core family" consisting of just two generations, generally with only a small number of children. Nevertheless, German culture is fairly community oriented due to a more socially oriented state policy. Despite the focus on the individual and his / her performance, there is a well-developed social security system. Clubs and societies, i.e. groups that provide an "us" feeling, have a long tradition in Germany and are very popular.

# 3.10

## Small talk

Small talk creates harmony in working and in private life. However, establishing personal ties as the basis of every business relationship...

...is in Germany often underestimated!

- In Germany, private and professional life are often strictly separated.
- Many Germans see exchange of non work- / project-related information as not very relevant in the working context (efficiency, value of time, "getting down to business" instead of "beating about the bush").



# 4.

## Dos & Don'ts

### DO

- Greet people when you meet them for the first time in the day (e.g. "Guten Morgen", "Guten Tag", "Guten Abend") followed by "Herr" or "Frau" and the family name.
- Introduce yourself when you meet people for the first time and shake hands firmly.
- Make an effort to become acquainted with people during coffee breaks and at lunchtime.
- Communicate directly and tell your opinion. This is a virtue to be taught to little children and is considered an expression of honesty and sincerity.
- Information and instructions should be rather extensive, clearly structured and also mostly confirmed in writing, even if an oral transmission has taken place.
- Be sure to meet deadlines or appointments. Distractions or interruptions – of whatever kind – are bothersome.
- Be always on time, but not way too early. Punctuality is very important, both in private and business life.
- The type of business attire is dependent on the position in the company. In general, however, you should pay attention to adequate and correct, but rather inconspicuous clothing.
- If you are invited for dinner, bring a gift, such as flowers or wine.



## DON'T

- Use recent German history as a topic for small talk.
- Call older people by their first names and "Du", unless they have offered you this privilege (young people tend to be much more informal).
- Be shy to ask questions, if you do not understand something.
- Private and business are usually treated separately. If you do not know your partner, do not ask too personal questions. This will very quickly be perceived as an intrusion into the private sphere.
- Come too late to a meeting. The maximum delay for a quarter of an hour is generally accepted, but can also be perceived as rude.
- Take the German direct way of speaking personally. Criticism is usually expressed bluntly.
- Gesticulate a lot in a business meeting or carry out any aggressive discussions.

# 5.

# Impressum

## **Publisher**

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**Status:** December 2014

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