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## **Germany**

The culture of present-day Germany displays an intriguing mix of generations-old traditions and new social developments of the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The country's complicated past remains a significant influence still very much felt in German society. The intricacy and diversity of the country have contributed to what appears to be an elusive and somewhat indefinable national identity – one not easily understood by either Germans themselves or those looking in from the outside. For Americans wishing to bridge international cultural barriers, understanding the complexity of Germany and its cultural themes and values provides at least a starting point towards meaningful communication with Germans. Awareness of differing communication styles is also key to successful communication.

Perceptions of Germany have long been tainted by the country's troubled past. The name of Germany carries possibly more negative connotations than the name of any other country. Wars, and leaders who were more concerned about their own prerogatives than the welfare of the people with whom they were entrusted, and who trusted them, have been a major plague. Germany's turbulent and often lurid past has not only caused a tainted perspective to outsiders, but has also been the source of the low national pride of its own citizens. World War II had a most devastating effect on German national pride. Cynthia Lynn Miller believes that one reason national pride is currently so frowned upon

is due to the fact that during the Third Reich the national pride that was founded largely on biological racism (3). During World War II, being proud of being German meant viewing other nations and cultures as inferior. This led to the extermination of millions of so-called inferior peoples by the German government.

Since the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Germany has undergone significant cultural changes. Divided by the Allies after World War II, the country was reunited in the early 1990s bringing the formerly communist East Germany (German Democratic Republic) into the democratic and capitalist West (Federal Republic of Germany). The reunification has not been without problems. Unemployment runs high among those from the former East Germany, for example, and there has been an increase in the number of nationalist demonstrations in recent years. In addition, the country has seen a large influx of refugees from other former communist countries. Germany's once strong economy has faltered as the nation has tried to assimilate these new residents (Burns 327). Unification produced a clash between the "individualistic, confident, open, upfront West Germans and the introverted, passive, loyal, and withdrawn East Germans" (Jandt 311). These changes within the German culture have caused further confusion to a national identity that has never been clearly defined, and pointed up a profound need for stability and order.

Many Germans today prefer to regard themselves as Europeans rather than Germans. This attitude has been re-enforced by all the governments since the founding of the Federal Republic with their policy of Western integration and their energetic encouragement of European union. West German politics are consistently aimed at presenting Germans as being "good Europeans."

One effect of the Germans' low sense of national pride can be seen in the ways in which national symbols are viewed. For example, most Germans today regard any salute to the German flag, or the singing of the German National Anthem as an attempt at nationalistic indoctrination and therefore highly politically incorrect. Generally, most explicit German manifestations of patriotism are suspect. Unlike the United States, the national flag is rarely seen in any official rooms. In American schools, children recite the Pledge of Allegiance and place their hands over their hearts. Such enthusiastic patriotism also often displayed during American sports events, concerts and parades would not be found in Germany.

Patriotism in Germany usually takes the form of constitutional patriotism i.e. being proud of the "Basic Law" (Grundgesetz) set up by the founding fathers and mothers of post-war Germany. The "Grundgesetz" laid the foundations for modern, democratic Germany (Burns 212). It is the authority for all political activities, and is generally seen as sacrosanct in public opinion. It is very difficult to implement any changes in the "Grundgesetz" or even any changes in its interpretation. By order of this constitutional law, the political participants in Germany have a very limited area of action. In 1949 the "Grundgesetz" was envisaged merely as a provisional constitutional structure for West Germany, to be replaced after the re-unification of the two German states by a common constitution. However, after re-unification in 1990 any attempt to put a new common constitution on the political agenda was doomed from the start. Interestingly, the precarious German national identity remains uncertain due largely to this clearly codified set of laws (Knapp).

This uncertain national identity combined with its troubled past seems to offer an explanation of Germany's devaluation of a sense of national pride. Germans explicitly do not state they are proud to be German. In stark contrast, in America after September 11, American flags were displayed everywhere. The ubiquitous signs and ribbons proclaiming "Proud to be American" along with television commercials stating, "I'm an American,"

reflected the national pride of Americans. While Americans value national pride, clearly Germans do not. Germans who suffered shame under the extreme cloud of Hitler's insanely nationalist regime are understandably afraid of being viewed as radical nationalists.

Order has been and remains a prevailing theme in German culture and society. *Ordnung muß sein* is a German saying meaning, "there must be order" (Nees, 36). It is frequently used in Germany, and reflects the country's need and desire for structure, laws, rules, and procedures. Everything is seen as having its time and its place. In German business culture, there is a low degree of "flexibility and spontaneity" (Gorrill). Organization and order are expected in all things.

Formality is also highly valued in the German culture. From an American perspective, German formality could almost be viewed as extreme. The German's value of formality shows up in many aspects of German life. They dress, eat, address others, visit, and conduct themselves in a very formal manner (Samovar & Porter 130). Even when Germans are going to visit a friend, being well dressed is very important.

German business culture also requires formality. As in America, shaking hands when meeting a person is the acceptable practice and a common custom. The colleague with the highest position in the corporate hierarchy always has the right to extend his or her hand first. In Germany, forms of address also follow along with German formality. Personal titles are always used when addressing someone. Titles are very important to Germans because they indicate a person's position in the social structure and point out his or her rank. Germans work hard to achieve their status. Even colleagues who have worked together for a number of years still use last names and the appropriate titles (Gorrill).

Germans and Americans have decidedly different communications styles. The way in which people communicate is related to their values and cultural patterns and norms. What is acceptable in America may not be acceptable in Germany. Different cultures communicate differently, not only verbally and linguistically, but also nonverbally.

German culture is a "low-context" culture where cultural messages are found primarily in the spoken or written word, with contextual information adding relatively little to the overall message. In contrast, Middle Eastern and East Indian cultures tend to be marked by meanings that are implicit and mediated by details of the situation, relationships, and non-verbal messages. Compared to the French, Germans are famous for their direct, to-the-point speech and their insistence on following the letter of the social and legal code.

Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter define low-context as “a form of communication in which the explicit coded message contains almost all of the information to be shared” (316). What this statement says is that most of the meaning in a low-context communication is being conveyed verbally. Therefore, language has an important function in low-context cultures. In a low-context culture, language is used to clearly express thoughts, ideas, and feelings. This is especially true of Germany.

German communication style is remarkably forward and detail oriented. Often stereotyped as opinionated and argumentative, Germans are simply extremely direct, especially in business settings. It is often the case that Germans will take a considerably long amount of time before reaching the main point of a speech, such as in a business presentation. In this respect, they provide much more detail and information than do Americans (Hall & Hall 49). For Americans, therefore, it is important when giving presentations to German listeners, to make sure to repeat the main point stated at the beginning of a speech. This will help ensure that the German listener has heard and had an opportunity to comprehend the essential information. Doing this will certainly reduce the possibility of misunderstanding.

Americans often think of themselves as being direct and to the point. Compared to many countries, this is true. However, American directness pales in comparison to the German version. “In terms of stating facts, offering criticism, and issuing direct commands,

Germans are generally more direct, leading to perceptions of them as opinionated, blunt, brusque know-it-alls” (Nees 72). These unfortunate perceptions stem from the innocent fact that directness and honesty are highly valued in Germany. In turn, the German people’s directness is related to their desire for clarity and their repugnance of ambiguity. In German business culture, criticism is openly expressed freely and often among business associates. German business discussions are often replete with criticism. However, it is usually directed at the topic, problem, or project at hand and is not intended as personal criticism or disapproval (Gorrill).

Apart from verbal communication, German nonverbal communication differs greatly from American nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication is defined as "all stimuli (except verbal) within a communication setting, generated by both the individual and his or her use of the environment, that have potential message value for both sender and receiver" (Samovar & Porter 179). Culture and nonverbal communication are linked. They both represent values considered worthy to pass on from generation to generation.

While Americans are more comfortable being non-verbally informal, Germans are significantly more constrained in both body gestures and vocal quality. German voice patterns tend to be relatively deeper and produce a lower number of modulations than do American voice patterns. This is viewed by Germans as a way of "remaining in control and divorcing emotions from reason" (Nees 90). In the German culture, exhibiting rationality takes precedence over displaying emotions. Careful precautions are taken to make this evident to others and to enforce it within their own country. There is, however, an interesting dichotomy to this rule: the accepted constriction of emotion seems to apply quite specifically to positive emotions. A German is more often willing to express negative emotions such as irritation, frustration, and anger. This dichotomy could present a problem when Germans and Americans attempt to communicate in a business setting. Americans tend to have vocal patterns that are more expressive of positive and happier emotions. Greg Nees says Germans tend to complain that "it is precisely this vocal quality that leads them to

perceive Americans as superficial and disingenuous, claiming that American voices are *überschwenglich*, or excessively exuberant" (91). It is, of course, possible for Americans to be superficial and insincere, but Germans do not always accurately interpret their vocal inflections. Misperceptions are so often the cause of misunderstanding cultural differences.

Personal space is highly important to Germans. They see it as an extension of themselves and tend to be very protective of it. Any intrusion into their personal space without invitation is unacceptable to them and extremely offensive. In German business culture, it is considered to be exceptionally unbusinesslike not to have an office door closed at all times. The closed door is a way of providing "a boundary between people, and minimizes eavesdropping, interruptions, and accidental intrusions" (Hall 41). Also, the proximal distance with which Germans are comfortable is greater than in the United States. They are uneasy when someone moves his or her chair in their offices to adjust this space. For this reason, Germans tend to have heavy office furniture in order for it to be difficult to rearrange (Ferraro 92).

Germans highly value time; and punctuality and reliability are considered important attributes. The German approach to time is one of carefully structured details and meticulous planning (Mattock 11). Because order and organization are so highly valued in Germany, structuring time forms a base for personal effectiveness. It is simply unacceptable to them to waste time. It is a precious commodity to be used wisely. Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall go so far as to say that German promptness is taken for granted and it is almost an obsession (35). It is difficult for Germans to respect people who do not take punctuality seriously. Being late is simply unacceptable in the German culture. In fact, in most instances, arriving early is essential. A good example of Germany's obsession with reliable timekeeping is its train system. The German railway is famous for its punctuality (Nees 36).

In German business culture, time is handled in a different way than it is in the United States. Long-term planning is always used. When a meeting is being set up, it is

usually done weeks in advance in order to solidify and guarantee it. Germans usually take more time to reach business decisions than do Americans. The process is often more “involved and deliberate” (Hall & Hall 35). This can be difficult for Americans who like to get things done as quickly as possible.

As presented here, Germany’s culture, values, and communication styles are vastly different from the United States. In the United States, it is acceptable to have a positive national identity and exhibit national pride. This is not so in Germany. Germans place a high value on being orderly and regulated. They are not as flexible and spontaneous as Americans. Communication styles also vary between Germany and America. German communication is serious and direct, almost to the point of seeming rude and brusque to Americans. Germans like to get right down to business. Because much business is done between the two countries, it is extremely important to be educated and aware of these differences. To ignore these considerations would most certainly result in miscommunication. Cooperation and comprehension between people of different countries can be difficult when each country has widely differing customs, perceptions, and expectations, as do Germany and America. A sincere wish to understand and respect each other’s values and communication styles will certainly go far towards achieving a positive and effective relationship.

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