

United Kingdom: communication, negotiations and cultural background

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1. Cultural background

This paper aims to provide essential information for those who need to communicate effectively with the British, whether for personal or business reasons. Both require a deep knowledge of typical communication and negotiation styles, which have their roots in the cultural background. A good understanding of the wider cultural context helps explain behaviours that might otherwise seem peculiar. This in turn allows you to predict them and adapt your own style in order to avoid unnecessary confusion and find a common ground for agreement.

One way of describing a national culture is to analyse its various characteristics in terms of the dimensions of culture. A dimension is an aspect of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures. It groups together a number of phenomena in a society which were empirically found to occur in combination, even if at first sight there does not always seem to be a logical necessity for their going together. The grouping of the different aspects of a dimension is always based on statistical relationships, that is, on trends for these phenomena to occur in combination, not on iron links (Hofstede, 2005).

In the present paper we focus on the following dimensions, selected on the basis of their relevance to the issue of communication and negotiation styles:

1. universalism (versus particularism),
2. individualism (versus communitarianism),
3. specificity (versus diffuseness),
4. status by achievement (versus status by ascription),
5. time as sequence (versus synchronized view of time).

1.1. Universalism

The universalistic approach is roughly: "What is good and right can be defined and always applies". In particularistic cultures far greater attention is given to the obligations of relationships and unique circumstances. For example, instead of assuming that the one good way must always be followed, the particularistic reasoning is that friendship has special obligations and hence may come first. Less attention is paid to abstract societal codes. The results of a survey published by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner (1997,

p. 35) demonstrate that the British culture can be classified as universalistic. 91 percent of respondents opted for a universalistic system. This fact has a number of crucial implications.

First, agreements reached during negotiations with British business partners should always be put in writing. The contract will be seen as definitive by universalists. Once you have struck a deal with them, they are unwilling to renegotiate it at a later stage. A trustworthy person is one who honours their word or contract. They adhere to the rule expressed in the popular saying "a deal is a deal". Moreover, it is common practice to introduce lawyers into the process of negotiation. You should thoroughly discuss all legal details in advance and be prepared for rational, professional arguments. In universalistic cultures personal relationship is often ignored. Negotiators do not devote much time to forging close bonds with their counterparts and tend to get down to business without delay. Uniform procedures imposed by the head office, as well as transparency and consistency play a major role.

1.2. Individualism

This dimension of culture has to do with whether people regard themselves primarily as individuals rather than as part of a group. The British nation can be described as moderately individualist. This is evident in the more frequent use of the "I" form, in contrast to the communitarian use of the "we" form. They feel comfortable taking decisions on their own and do not hesitate to assume personal responsibility. Since consulting superiors and reaching consensus is not deemed necessary, the decision-making process is short. Although this may seem beneficial, saving time in decision-making is often followed by significant delays due to implementation problems. The individualist approach can also be observed in the role of translators. They are supposed to be neutral and refrain from adding their own interpretations or mediating misunderstandings.

1.3. Specificity

The British culture has been found to be highly specific-oriented. Such cultures are sometimes called low-context. This dimension of culture has to do with how much you have to know before effective communication can occur; how much shared knowledge is taken for granted by those in conversation with each other; how much reference there is to tacit common ground. Thanks to their small areas of privacy clearly separated from public life, they do not take things personally, and consequently are not afraid of open criticism or losing face. Work and private life are sharply separated. During negotiations they get straight to the point and

focus on specific, measurable objectives. When doing business with the British, it is advisable to ensure that meetings are well-structured.

1.4. Achievement-oriented culture

While some societies accord status to people on the basis of their achievements, others ascribe it to them by virtue of age, class, gender, education, and so on. In Britain you are judged on what you have accomplished. The first question in a conversation is likely to be "What did you study?", not "Where did you study?". Academic titles are often considered irrelevant in business environment. According to Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner (1997), in Britain it may not be considered relevant for a consultant to have a PhD, and if attention is drawn to it, the status claimed is not necessarily legitimate. During business negotiations with the British it is essential to have enough data, technical advisers and knowledgeable people, whereas in ascription-oriented cultures more importance is attached to the seniority and formal position of team members.

1.5. Sequential culture

There is no denying the fact that today's world of business is obsessed with time and the pace of life is increasing relentlessly. Owing to this almost universal preoccupation with time, it is vital to understand the different attitudes towards it that have been found in sequential and synchronic cultures. Our conception of time is strongly affected by culture because time is an idea rather than an object. Sociologists see it as a social construct enabling members of a culture to co-ordinate their activities. The British culture falls into the sequential category, in which time is a series of passing events. This orientation manifests itself in a number of ways that will be of interest to negotiators.

The British show a strong preference for following initial plans. Project managers should take care not to fall behind schedule and negotiators must keep appointments strictly. One should neither attempt to rush nor delay negotiations or business meetings. Although British people do not always equate time with money, they do expect visitors to be punctual and obey the rules regarding proper times for activities. Time is viewed as a commodity to be used up and lateness deprives business partners of precious minutes. Another significant implication of the sequential style of behaviour is concentrating on only one activity at any given time. For example, Britons should not be expected to greet a visitor spontaneously and immediately while talking on the telephone.

2. Verbal communication

Having analysed the cultural background of Great Britain and the imprint it leaves on communication and negotiation style, we go on to depict the features of communication itself. In order to comprehend this process in depth, it is necessary to distinguish between verbal and nonverbal communication. They are equally important and inseparable means of conveying information. It is widely acknowledged that between 60 and 80 per cent of our message is communicated through our body language, whereas only 7 to 10 per cent is attributable to the actual words of a conversation. However, since the British communication style is described as "explicit", messages are conveyed in large part through words.

With respect to verbal communication, two distinct channels can be discussed: the content and the form. As noted earlier, the British culture is categorized as low-context. This means that except for the opening small talk, they concentrate on the subject matter of negotiations. It is always advisable to try to initiate conversation with open questions rather than an assertion of a personal point of view. Welcome topics of conversation include the weather, sports, current affairs, British history, culture and popular music. The British tend to be tolerant of other people's points of view. However, it is generally best to avoid certain topics, such as politics, religion and the Royal Family. Above all, the British value their privacy and may resent inquiries regarding their families or work situations.

Although the British communication style seems relatively straightforward, a word of caution is in order. When doing business in the UK you will probably find that direct questions often receive evasive responses and conversations may be ambiguous and full of subtleties.

A vital element in all aspects of British life and culture is the renowned British sense of humour. Humour is frequently used as a defence mechanism, often in the form of self-depreciation or irony. The British use humour a lot to release emotions dammed up behind the "stiff upper lip". They also regard understatement as funny.

Another key, though frequently underestimated, aspect of verbal communication is the form of what is said. First, it is not polite to interrupt anybody. For the Anglo-Saxons, when A stops, B starts. On the other hand, they always attempt to prevent awkward pauses by keeping up the conversation and feel compelled to fill up the weighty silence with lively and entertaining chatter. Although not all Britons are particularly articulate, you should make an effort to speak in complete sentences. As has been indicated, eloquence is highly valued by British people, therefore they pay attention to the correctness of the language.

3. Non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication, sometimes called body language, is the process of transmitting messages without spoken words that goes on in every face-to-face encounter with another human being. Information can be conveyed through gestures and facial expressions (kinesics), eye contact (oculesics), touching (haptics), maintaining appropriate distance (proxemics), paralanguage (nonverbal cues of the voice), as well as object communication.

The British, being notoriously undemonstrative, keep emotions hidden from public view so as not to make anyone uncomfortable.

First, in British culture the language of gestures is not frequently used and only the most basic gestures are performed. Overdoing a gesture can sometimes come across as aggressive behaviour.

Second, with regard to eye contact, Britons show a tendency to keep it relatively short, as it can provoke misunderstandings between people. Direct eye contact may be misinterpreted as hostility and aggressiveness. If you are talking to a group, then make eye contact with all people, and do not focus your attention on one person alone.

Third, the idiom "keep a stiff upper lip" describes an attribute of British people, who display fortitude in the face of adversity and exercise self-restraint in the expression of emotion. During meetings, this means your British colleagues will approach business with an air of formality and detachment.

What is more, British culture shuns physical contact. Except for the handshake, other forms of touching behaviour are inappropriate in business relations. Men should not initiate physical contact with women.

The reserved nature of the British is emphasized by their respect towards personal space. It is highly valued by them and keeping an acceptable distance is advised. In order to feel comfortable, they create a kind of personal air bubble around them. During conversation they prefer to stand next to each other rather than opposite.

As far as paralanguage is concerned, the British speak in low, measured tones, without raising the voice. It is impolite to interrupt others; intonation conveys one has finished speaking and, in British English, the voice normally goes down at the end of an affirmative sentence.

Last but not least, one should not ignore object communication, of which the most common form is clothing. Conservative dress is the norm for both men and women in British business

culture, where darker colours (black, dark blue, charcoal grey) and heavier fabrics (wool) predominate. An almost snobbish awareness of "quality" can be noticed, nonetheless the style of outfit varies depending on the profession. Thus, senior bankers, civil servants, lawyers and accountants are still likely to wear traditional, formal suits. Other occupations dress differently. For example, those in advertising or the media tend to wear something rather more flamboyant, though still stylish. Women may wear trousers (including trouser-suits). Neither sex should wear denim. Some British firms have introduced the concept of "dress-down" Friday with its code of "smart casual" but it is not universal and it is better to err on the side of being over-dressed. Extremely informal clothing is not considered appropriate even during leisure activities.

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