



Medius Training

Negotiating with the British : From across the waters.

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Discussing culture is always a bit tricky because there is no sitting on the fence; either one belongs to one culture or to another. As Lawrence once put it, no one can choose to adopt a culture other than his own; all that he can do is lose his native culture, without quite gaining the new one. The problem is that belonging to a culture can make objectivity difficult. We tend to caricature and judge. To enable us, as British negotiators, to see ourselves as our European partners see us, we decided to use sketches drawn by our clients from across Europe of their experience of negotiating with the Brits. Because we immediately react with the classic "they don't understand" whenever a foreigner attempts describes us, we have endeavoured to temper these sketches with British insights into



our own culture. We have tried to draw a picture that could make sense both from an insular as well as a continental point of view. To begin with, we asked some of our European clients to express the ONE thing to watch out for when negotiating with the British. We shall summarise the comments we gathered and identify the underlying cultural issues.

"We did, we did.... we didn't think it was a good idea!"

Probably the most puzzling thing for foreigners - and why we are prone to frequent accusations of "perfidy"- is the language of interaction. There are many particularities that have their roots in the structure of the English language. It is, for example, the only European language that allows one to change the meaning of the entire sentence whilst still pronouncing it. Compare it with a language like German where, because the verb is placed at the end, the entire sentence has to be constructed semantically before it is uttered, or French where the "ne" has to come before the verb. The difference is profound. To continentals, we have this bewildering way of apparently changing our mind, our position, even our values as the situation develops. What is even more distressing is that this takes place through subtle, often hidden cues that are totally unintelligible to foreigners.



Hinting, an art form

The British culture is deeply impregnated with “hinting”. The outcome of genetically diffident people having practised for centuries “getting the message across” to each other without ever directly “coming out with it”, is that we are very good at making and taking “hints”—which most other Europeans miss completely. On a scale with “hinting” at one end and “direct” at the other, we can place different national conversational styles. Hinting people often prefer not to say exactly what they mean because they’re concerned with the effect their ideas might have on those they’re talking to. Instead of coming straight to the point (“I don’t think this will work” or “I want to conclude the meeting at 4 o’clock sharp”) hinting people prefer to hint at what they’re trying to say, hoping that the other person will understand without them having to be explicit.



The British art of “Politeness” is a classic form of indirectness. We have conventions of politeness that try to make the other person comfortable by not imposing, by giving them a way out, by being friendly etc. Other cultures have more direct styles and value the directness of saying what you mean, (even quite brutally), assuming the other person will appreciate their “honest” approach. When a British hinter and a direct Dutchman meet, negotiations may be tense unless you have acquired the ability to adjust as a result of 40 years at Royal Dutch Shell or Unilever!

Since the British are at the “hinting” end of the scale we can find other more direct conversational styles aggressive, rude, or even obtuse. People from more direct cultures may find the British wishy-washy, inconsistent or even misleading. Hinters can come across as unclear and indecisive, whereas Direct people can come across as pushy, rude or insensitive.

Similarly, we can place national conversational styles along two other scales. Whereas the words we use convey information, **How** we speak or deliver words can communicate more than a simple exchange of facts. The **mechanisms** we use for conversation (speed, volume and intonation etc.) can lead people to draw conclusions, not about conversational style but about our negotiating style and position. One mechanism is volume. For example in negotiations with people they don’t know very well, the British tend to talk quite softly and modulate their tone of voice to what we assume to be a pleasant, non-threatening monotone.

However, people from cultures where the normal volume is greater (especially Southern European cultures) can find this suspicious. Loud speakers think soft speakers are withholding information, being secretive or lacking in confidence. They can also find it difficult to take criticism or anger seriously if it is not shouted! Equally, at the other end of the loud-soft scale, the British can definitely feel aggressed by loud speakers, giving rise to comments such as “What have I done wrong, why are they shouting at me?” Pace is another mechanism. Very often our European clients comment on the speed at which we Brits speak. Even Americans complain, so imagine how difficult it must be for second-language English speakers to keep up with us!



To summarise these points on conversational style, we can say that the British tend to speak fast, in a soft tone of voice, and prefer to hint to get their message across. In negotiating terms, this can have several implications. Firstly, it is sometimes difficult for other parties to know exactly what the Brits want. Especially if they're in a weaker position, the Brits will not come out directly with their needs if they are afraid of being refused outright. They will hint and make allusions and hope that the other side will get the message. Similarly, when making their opening position at the outset of the negotiations, the fast/soft/hinting delivery can make it very difficult for second-language English speakers to get a clear handle on the British position. We advise our friends across the waters to question for clarification at all times, summarise for understanding on every major point, and try, try, try to pin them down! Get it on paper - Read your own notes back to confirm understanding. This is vital when concessions are being made. The "hinting" means that often the linkages between concessions and conditions are not made explicit by the British. The Continental might have understood what it is he is expected to concede, but it may still be unclear to him what he is getting in return! Our advice to them is to clarify ruthlessly, force us to use "if" . "then". "If you'll give us so and so, **then** we can change our delivery dates" (Put your conditions first!)

"Excellent, splendid, super, spiffing and all that"

One of our French associates loves to tell about the difficulties he encountered on arriving in the UK to work in an all-Brit office. He was repeatedly made to feel socially incompetent, making faux pas after faux pas and leaving awkward silences everywhere in his wake. What could be happening?

Back at home, he was a reasonably popular fellow, and had established very good working relationships with German, Belgian and Dutch partners before coming to our misty isles. Then one day all became clear as he was dejectedly watching a re-run of the "Avengers" TV cult series. John Steed, the main character, elegantly sailed his way through the entire blood-thirsty episode without formulating anything more than "amazing" or "you don't say" and responding to life-threatening catastrophes with a heartfelt "oh dear". This gave him an important insight into British culture and the attitude of "British understatement". By contrast, foreign villains are portrayed with a propensity to sweeping statements and wild generalisations. It seems that we Brits avoid generalisations. Since most continental verbal interaction is based on exchanging generalisations to make conversation, the meeting between British and other European negotiators can quickly become awkward. Consider how we feel about German "ponderousness" or Italian "talkativeness" or French "arrogance"! Armed with this new insight, our French associate returned, determined to limit his vocabulary to a few strategic utterances such as "excellent" or "I see what you mean, absolutely!", and finishing every one of his phrases with the strategic "Isn't it?". To his astonishment (and relief), his problems disappeared overnight. He became "one of the lads" and discovered that most of his working partners were more than willing to share their thoughts and difficulties with him.



This aspect of British culture can have a major impact on what happens at the negotiating table. Our advice to other Europeans negotiating with the Brits is the “no generalisation” rule. They need to know that points will not be reinforced by the statement of general rules, on the contrary they will become suspect, and open to a full range of counter examples—if not direct attack. We have seen many Continentals “set themselves up” with the British by trying to argue a position through a set of general statements. As a result they encounter an unexpected barrage of reactions ranging from flippant comments or snide remarks to incomprehensible jokes and anecdotal counter-examples. If they try to force the point, things will only get worse. We Brits are likely to be embarrassed by this “scene” and will fall into an awkward silence. To re-establish an effective working climate Continentals must develop their own technique of the understatement i.e. threatening catastrophes with a heartfelt “oh dear”. This gave him an important insight into British culture and the attitude of “British understatement”. By contrast, foreign villains are portrayed with a propensity to sweeping statements and wild generalisations. It seems that we Brits avoid generalisations. Since most continental verbal interaction is based on exchanging generalisations to make conversation, the meeting between British and other European negotiators can quickly become awkward. Consider how we feel about German “ponderousness” or Italian “talkativeness” or French “arrogance! Armed with this new insight, our French associate returned, determined to limit his vocabulary to a few strategic utterances such as “excellent” or “I see what you mean, absolutely!” and finishing every one of his phrases with the strategic “Isn’t it?”. To his astonishment (and relief), his problems disappeared overnight. He became “one of the lads” and discovered that most of his working partners were more than willing to share their thoughts and difficulties with him.

Tradition - The trap

In many ways, the British are slaves to tradition - we love it - anywhere, anyhow. But what catches most foreigners by surprise is that as individuals we are not traditional at all. British executives will embrace every new idea, technology and trend with reckless abandon. The traditionalism evident in double-decked buses, red telephone booths, and garden gnomes is only skin-deep. British culture has been changing very rapidly since the war and even more so in the last two decades. Books on “dealing with the British” have previously focused mainly upon the upper class. There is a gap between this and the reality of shopping at Sainsbury’s on a Friday night!

No matter how “traditional” the British may appear, they are in fact fierce individualists which might surprise foreigners. Behind the same exterior symbols; the same grey pin-striped suit, the same Volvo Estate car and the same semi-detached house, they discover our very British sense of individuality. In negotiating terms, this “trompe l’oeil” is often extremely awkward in that it makes the relationship element of negotiating with us very unpredictable. The difficulty is that, as with most things with the British, once past the first formal stages of a relationship, there are no rules. To most Continentals with strong cultures where relationships are regulated in detail until one reaches intimate friendship, this is quite disconcerting and must be kept in mind.

Whereas we have very formal and traditional rules of conduct and etiquette that apply to the first “impersonal” stages of a relationship or more particularly to the opening stages of a negotiation, once a more informal atmosphere has been established, there are no strict rules of conduct. As a French Business Manager put it, “in France we are less formal than the Brits at the start of a relationship, but over time, we don’t tend to become as informal as the British will”. The British negotiator should therefore err on the side of formality for longer in negotiating with a Continental partner.

“Terribly sorry, old chap”

Individualism may become downright stubbornness. Because we do not feel pressured to conform to a general consensus, a Brit will have no trouble saying “No” to any point which other European negotiators argue is for the “common good”. Insularity and the Island Mentality contribute to our willingness to fight point by point to the last. Our European partners may see this as a tough approach in multi party, multi cultural negotiations. Equally we can be seen to be playing the role of the devil’s advocate.



Of course, the disadvantage of this “semi-detached” attitude is that we are often under-achieve in longer-term joint venture projects. A perfect example of this is the high-speed rail link between the channel tunnel and London. After 10 or more years of everybody throwing their spanner in the works because it is impossible to satisfy everybody all of the time, the Eurostar zips through France at 300 km per hour and crawls through the South East at half the speed!

Watch out for the accountants or my heart weeps but my wallet smiles

True of much of Europe, but especially the UK, is the emergence over the last 10 years of the “accountant mentality”. The economic crisis of the late 80’s hit us in the UK earlier and harder perhaps than elsewhere, and subsequent “downsizing” activities were brutally numbers led. The balance of power has shifted within companies, and it is now a younger force of finance directors with spreadsheets and profit centres that win the day. When other Europeans negotiate a joint venture with us, we have to justify every proposal to our accountants back home. The ghost at the negotiating table is the British accountant. Continentals are learning that to lay the ghost we need spreadsheets and other quantitative material far more than most Europeans. We are, as Napoleon observed, a nation of shop-keepers. Money is not dirty, we enjoy talking about it, and “Bargain Hunting” is a national past-time. There is nothing wrong with boasting about how little one has paid for something!

Be strong on the spirit of the agreement

As negotiators, it is important to note another problem frequently mentioned by our European clients. They often claim that the British team or company they have been working with has been less than upfront or even dishonest and that we will change our minds at the last minute. This is what the French call the “perfidie albion” syndrome. We, the British, rightly get very indignant about such comments! Why the misunderstanding? It comes from a profoundly different perception of the notion of the contract. For us, a contract is contextual. If the context should change, then the terms of agreement must surely be modified accordingly....? Ah so....? say the Germans, Ah bon? say the French! If we look at the British legal system, we can see that its unwritten laws accord a far greater place to jurisprudence than to defined law, like for example French Napoleonic law. There is the notion of the “spirit” of the law, as opposed to the “letter” of the law. This means that if the context of agreement changes, especially if the changes are seen to be out of the control of all concerned, then the British will be far more ready to modify an agreement in order to maintain the original “spirit” of the agreement. This pragmatic flexibility is often widely misinterpreted by other cultures.



Hints and Tips

In conclusion, we would like to emphasise the hints and tips we give to our Continental clients on negotiating with the British. (Remember, this is advice to your European partners)

- Prepare in detail for the meetings.
- Avoid a fixed sequence - plan around issues
- Technical data should be solidly researched as the Brits are not known as realistic pragmatists for nothing
- Prepare thorough costings and spreadsheets for the British accountants!
- Once the meeting has started, remember that the Brits can quickly become more relaxed - try to do the same.
- Avoid taking abrupt or authoritative positions on points as this approach will antagonise them, even if they agree with what you're saying!
- If you are in the UK, do not expect to eat a proper lunch, sandwiches in the meeting room are very common (unless, of course, they're trying to impress you, in which case you'll be taken to the latest French restaurant in town!).
- During the discussions Listen Listen. Britain is a hinting culture, and you have to learn to decode the messages. If you're getting mixed messages or you don't understand something, question for clarification and summarise - your understanding of their position.
- If the Brits still look uncomfortable, then think hard, you're missing something. Start again.
- Don't be surprised if they come back at the last minute with changes, things could be happening back-stage.
- Last but not least, remember to dress smartly but conservatively. When in doubt, err on the side of the dark grey suit, at least you can be sure it will match the weather and the boardroom carpet!!

In holding a mirror up to the British negotiator we in Medius Training, hope you will see yourself and find it easier to conclude the agreement.



*the sharing
of experience*

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