



# cross-cultural values of germany/germans

a guideline for companies



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Each culture can be described in various ways. In this document, we refer to the academic work of Sylvia Schroll-Machl: author, cross-cultural scientist and trainer.

It must be noted that these cultural standards should not be seen as being completely separate from each other.

1. On the one hand, they influence each other. Thus, one cultural standard may be the origin of another.
2. On the other hand, a certain combination of different cultural standards forms the basis for a specific kind of behavior.

So, without further ado, let's get started!

### **objectivism**

In interpersonal encounters, there are always two levels of interaction: the objective level and the personal level. Depending on their cultural background, people may either focus on the factors related to the content or on the social aspects.

For most Germans, the content-related level is emphasized in business life. In business meetings, Germans always "come to the point" and "keep to the point". Private matters are thus less welcome in a business situation. Furthermore, Germans are mostly well-prepared. Their written and very detailed preparations provide a perfect basis for conversations and discussions.

Personal relationships – e.g., with business partners – are not that important. If you know and like each other, that is a pleasant side-effect but it is not the priority.



Thus, business is not done on the basis of a personal relationship or to do someone a favor. Performance is of the highest importance. Accordingly, not much is invested in building up a personal relationship in business. The persons involved shall WORK together well and effectively.

Small talk or extended get-to-know-each-other phases are regarded as a waste of time among colleagues and business partners. The business is the focus, not the person.

German objectivism is also recognizable through the relevance of property. Material things like cars, the new TV, the house or your own garden are highly appreciated and, of course, cherished; the property of another is treated respectfully.

Objectivism does not mean that Germans do not have any relationships or emotions. However, it is the case that in Germany, trust results from professional cooperation. If a colleague or business partner has done good work, he gains respect and can only subsequently become a friend. Emotions and personality are present all the time, but they are commonly not shown in business life.

#### **Assessment of this cultural standard**

Advantage: Social aspects are of minor importance. Thus, the focus is more strongly on business and error avoidance.

Disadvantage: Germans are often perceived to be cold, hard and unfriendly.

#### **structures & rules**

In Germany, there is a multitude of rules and laws: There are regulations regarding public life [from waste disposal to road traffic], rules for certain areas [e.g., at public institutions, such as the library], business-related norms [quality regulations, defined operation...] and many more ... Of course, there are rules which organize life in other countries, too. However, in comparison with the Federal Republic, it is obvious that:

- there are many more rules in Germany than in other countries,
- these rules are laid down in extreme detail,
- established rules are followed frequently,
- other people immediately advise you to adhere to the rules and laws if you do not do so.



Such structures which tell you how to behave can be found in almost all spheres of life in Germany. It is a peculiarity that these rules are seldom or never questioned. The rules are naturally adhered to.

What is the reason for that? The background of this cultural standard is the need for clear and reliable orientation and for control over the respective situation. Thus, tasks are extensively planned, structured and organized, which has the following advantages, as seen from a German perspective:

- Tasks can be executed effectively
- Errors can be prevented. [The numerous rules and laws exist for a good reason. They are passed to learn from the experience of other people who had worked on similar problems before, thus helping to avoid making the same mistakes again.]
- Risk can be minimized

Rules figure largely in the FRG and they are kept, but not in all cases! Some rules are of the highest importance, which is why all people follow them. However, there are other guidelines that are seen as outdated and are given little attention nowadays. Naturally, each and every person decides for himself which rules are right and which are no longer sensible.

#### **Assessment of this cultural standard**

Advantage: Through well-organized systems, very good results are achieved - "Made in Germany" has not become a sign of quality by chance.



Disadvantage: Due to their numerous plans, Germans are often relatively inflexible; changes at short notice are met with disapproval. Moreover, the work can become ineffective whenever certain rules and individual operations have to be followed strictly.

#### **time planning**

You already know that the FRG is a country with "sequential time management". That means that tasks are completed one after another and that people proceed according to relatively strict schedules. Now we would like to take a closer look at a genuine German value called "Time planning".

In Germany, time is seen as finite and is thus a valuable resource; it must be used sensibly. This is the reason why lots of Germans have a very strong awareness of this factor; good time management is the basic precondition for working efficiently. As a result, it is common to make carefully structured and exact long-term schedules. Additionally, exact arrangements are made for almost all activities: at work, for private appointments, at the hairdresser, etc.

These arrangements are often regarded as being binding. A lack of punctuality is understood as a show of disrespect towards the matter or the person. Plans can only be perfectly implemented if time is kept by all persons involved! Exceptions and delays are only permissible in emergency situations.

It is important to concentrate on the issue at hand and not to be distracted by minor matters on the side in order to adhere to the schedule. As you already know, the "object" is the focus of attention for Germans. That is, the schedule serves the purpose of making sure that the task can be carried out in an undisturbed manner [You already know that in the FRG there is "Rule-oriented, internalized control". Many Germans are internally motivated to process within an optimum time frame.].



From the point of view of other cultures, Germans are often caught up in their schedules and arrangements and are very inflexible and not spontaneous.

They seem to be almost obsessed with timed plans. But it is regarded as positive that time arrangements with Germans are at a reliability rate of nearly 100 percent. Of course, German citizens expect all other people to adhere to agreed appointments.

#### **Assessment of this cultural standard**

**Advantage:** By proceeding in a well-planned manner, there is no danger of leaving something out; details are given the necessary attention and the quality increases.

**Disadvantage:** The lack of flexibility is quite negative. It is very unpleasant and difficult for Germans when they are thrown out of schedule.

## **directness**

It is principally true that in any kind of communication, not all of the information that may be required for the description of a certain issue is explicitly vocalized. For example, many messages are also conveyed nonverbally, such as through facial expressions and gestures. How much is directly communicated varies from culture to culture. Thus, there are high context cultures and low context cultures.

Germany has a "low context culture"; the information which is made explicit is extensive. In other words, the Federal Republic is well-known for an extremely direct way of speaking about things. This is what the cultural standard "Direct communication style" is about.

German directness is a particularly noticeable cultural standard. People express their own opinions clearly and unambiguously. This means that in any messages, there is no room for interpretations, as is the case in indirect communication. The point is made without any detours; important issues are clearly addressed.



It does not matter if the subject matter is positive or negative. The goal is that the information is conveyed. The feelings of the person receiving the message are not the priority. Mistakes and failures are openly pointed out in this way. Criticism is expressed directly and problems are analyzed clearly.

The WHAT is in the foreground, but HOW something is presented is of secondary importance. So the focus is clearly on the content of the message and, with that, on a content-related level. In other words, in Germany, you mean what you say and you say what you mean.

Please note: If you want to communicate and work successfully and effectively in Germany, it is vital that you adapt to this style of communication! You have to say directly what you want and think as well. Insinuations and hints will not be taken note of in most cases!

### **Assessment of this cultural standard**

**Advantage:** Direct communication makes it possible to access all necessary information. Everybody involved knows exactly what is going on.

**Disadvantage:** To foreigners it can seem unfriendly to express everything explicitly. Furthermore, there seems to be little consideration for the people's feelings.