

THE INVISIBLE BARRIER: THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Excerpt from: John Mole, Mind Your Manners, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London, 1997

FRANCE

Language

A love of elegance applies above all to language. National pride increases sensitivity to incorrect use of the language, but people also find it genuinely jarring to hear it being massacred. While this is a reason to learn to speak it well, it is not an excuse for not trying. It is more of a compliment to make an effort than an offence to speak it badly.

It may also be a necessity to speak French, however poorly. The French are almost as notoriously bad at languages as the British and Italians and for the same reason – they are badly taught in school. As far as English is concerned there has been a noticeable change of attitude in recent years. Soon French children will begin to learn English at the age of seven and the syllabus is being made more practical.

They are less tolerant when French is written badly – and there is less excuse for making mistakes. It is worthwhile persuading typists to overcome their inhibitions about contradicting *le patron* and making corrections. Even slight memos and notes are written in a mandarin style that in other countries is the preserve of senior civil servants. You will rarely find colloquially written memos and reports in the recorded speech style favoured by Anglo-Saxons. This is partly a concern for professionalism and partly an emphasis on correct grammar and usage in school. To write correctly is a sign of education and breeding.

Leadership

Hierarchical systems are generally shallow and boundaries are flexible. People will cut across reporting lines if necessary. The egalitarianism and openness evident in society are reflected at the workplace. The Dutch are easily shocked by the hierarchical discrimination practised in many other cultures. Seniority is a necessary convenience and power is camouflaged rather than flouted. The boss is a *primus inter pares*, 'one of us'. He is therefore seen as the most important collaborator. This does not mean that he does not exert authority or is treated as one of the gang. He has usually grown up with the company and has not been brought in, either as a professional senior manager or a graduate high-flyer. The exception would be in smaller, more fluid high-tech companies.

Relationships between all levels are generally open and highly tolerant. Communication is open and transparent. There is a preference for *buurten*, which means 'visiting' in the American sense, over written communication. The Dutch are not good at keeping secrets and uncomfortable with deviousness, their own as much as other people's. Everyone is expected to make suggestions and contributions and expects his or her upward communications to be listened to with respect. At the same time people are conservative and resistant to change. While brainstorming and kicking ideas around in a group are perfectly feasible and nothing will be dismissed outright, ideas have to be well researched and thought out before they are taken seriously. There is a mistrust of intuition and a requirement for clarity.

Planning

Forecasting and planning are not salient features of Spanish business practice. 'Who knows what will happen tomorrow? This is partly a question of mentality and partly because the mechanisms for forward planning are underdeveloped. In an environment where accounting for yesterday is rudimentary, accounting for tomorrow is a luxury.

Fixing a strategy is the responsibility of the chief executive or the owner. It will be based on intuition and business sense rather than systematic study. If it is communicated at all, which no one expects, it will be in the form of vague hints and admonitions. There is no taste for intellectual schemas and grand designs. The preference is for the tangible, the practical and the opinions of people one trusts. Time spent gathering numerical information and making studies is seen as time wasted. Information gathering is a question of talking to as many people as one can without letting on what you are trying to find out. In a business environment where numbers of any sort are unreliable or non-existent, it is the only tactic. In a more modern company, if there is a formal, written plan it is likely to have been put together by strategic planning consultants for the benefit of senior managers. But translating it into specific action plans may be beyond the experience or inclination of middle management.

A traditional family company is unlikely to have financial plans, budgets or accounts. The key numbers are turnover and cashflow. Unless they are declining other figures are unimportant. Sensitivity to the 'bottom line' in the sense of net profit is not highly developed. In many companies systems that are capable of showing it do not exist, or if they are in place there is no willingness by top management to share the information. Accounting systems are designed not to enlighten but to conceal financial information from tax authorities and banks.

This is rapidly changing under the influence of foreign investors and business partners who demand what they consider to be proper reporting. The stock market is also exerting pressure for accounting standards and independent auditing. Spanish investors have been wary of investing directly in companies and prefer to use the intermediary of investment funds which spread the risk and benefit from better intelligence than the individual can hope to gain. But shareholders and entrepreneurs have woken up to the potential of a well-regulated, independent and active market to raise capital and realise personal fortunes.

Attitudes and behaviour

Serial conversation

Finnish conventions of communication can be off-putting to outsiders. Serial conversation is the rule. By this is meant that each person takes it in turns to speak while the others listen intently without interruption or even signs of attention and encouragement. When the speaker has finished the other party may meditate on what has been said before responding. The Anglo-Saxon style of interrupting and finishing sentences and leaping in with an instant reaction and comment of one's own is considered disrespectful, while the Mediterranean style of simultaneous conversation in which everyone speaks at once is incomprehensible. Such conversationalists are apt to think, mistakenly, that Finns do not understand what is being said and if they do, that it is penetrating very slowly.

As foreigners are unlikely to attempt Finnish, the language of choice is likely to be English or, if it is a common language, Swedish. However, Finnish linguistic conventions still apply. A strong value is placed on speaking plainly and openly, without exaggeration or understatement, and if possible with statements expressed in facts and figures.

At the same time self-presentation is low key and laconic to the point of cryptic. It is not done to be expressive, assertive or emotional. Or to say things more than once. Natural reserve is compounded by a reluctance to speak foreign languages if there is a risk of making mistakes. There is no taboo on humour in a business environment as there is in other some other cultures, but by English or Irish standards it just does not occur very often. Good humour rather than humour characterises business relationships. Finns are the first to acknowledge that they are not good at small talk. Conversation its own sake is regarded as a waste of breath. Natural shyness derives largely from a strong concept of personal privacy, even insularity, from which strangers are excluded.

A lack of ostentation is reflected in self-presentation. Despite their fashion industry, Finns do not regard themselves as smart dressers and this is not disputed by outside observers. For men, sober jackets and ties are conventional at most levels, perhaps a grey or a brown suit, but there are many companies in which casual wear is acceptable. Dark suits are for very serious occasions.

Status differences are minimal and the younger generation of managers at any level pride themselves on being approachable. There is slightly more formality about the use of last names and titles than in say Sweden or Denmark, but usually one rapidly gets on to first-name terms with people at any level of seniority and regardless of gender. In conservative circles, which usually means Swedish Finns, this takes longer and the more traditional and upper class will wait for an invitation to do so from the senior person.

Meetings

Meetings are the most important and time-consuming management tool. Only the least important decisions or instructions are not formulated, discussed, approved, ratified, communicated, implemented at a meeting. They are not regarded as interruptions from real work. It is not acceptable to leave a meeting half-way through, make phone calls, get on with paperwork.

Many meetings are scheduled well in advance and have comprehensive agendas. They are interspersed with others at short notice to discuss specific issues. They only start on time in companies which make a specific point of doing this and usually continue until all the business has been dealt with. Only the most formal end on time. The more 'creative' the participants – advertising, media and so on – the more unstructured it will be.

A meeting without a concrete result of some sort is deemed a failure. It may be a decision, the allocation of responsibilities, a series of action steps, or simply an agreement to have another meeting.

Meetings are informal in style and begin and end with social conversation. Participants are expected to make a contribution, if only questions and not necessarily in their specialist area.

Opinions are encouraged and listened to but the extent to which they are taken into account depends on seniority. It is not usual for everyone to be well prepared. Even when papers are previously distributed they will not always be read. Lack of preparation does not inhibit the passing of opinion and judgement.

Passive consensus is important. A concern to avoid disharmony among the group and disloyalty to the boss will smooth over all but the most fundamental disagreement.

The process at a decision-making meeting may be adversarial. A designated individual will present a proposal to the group and defend it. If it is approved he or she is mandated to implement it. It is not usual to lobby individual members beforehand, since they will not make a commitment to an idea before they have learned what the others think. Even if they have contributed to the formulation of a proposal they play an objective role at the meeting.

Attitudes and behaviour

Germans are competitive and ambitious. They do not identify or sympathise with failure. It is shameful to be out of work and bankruptcy is a social and professional stigma. They place a great deal of importance on individual success and its outward trappings. The car you drive, the size of your office, where you take holidays are important.

There is a clear demarcation between private and business life. They leave work as punctually as they arrive and rarely take work home. They do not like being called at home on business unless there is a very good reason. People at all levels take their full holiday entitlement and they do not keep in touch with the office when they are away or expect to be called.

There is not the same alliance building across boundaries as in many companies. Informal contacts are more within functions rather than across boundaries. But they are frequent and important. On a personal basis colleagues like to know a lot about each other. They are very liberal and uncensorious about private life but they like to know who they are dealing with.

The highly organised career structure of German companies limits the potential for individual advancement. It is not likely that a colleague or a subordinate will suddenly be whisked ahead of you or that an outsider will be brought in. This reduces the threat of competition and cultivates an attitude of cooperation based on mutual self-interest. People will associate with and help those who are capable and likely to succeed. There is a high value placed on *Kollegialität* coupled with a strong distaste for non-conformism. At the outset newcomers will be treated with a certain degree of mistrust until they establish their credentials, their ability and whether they pose a threat. Once they are established they will be treated a lot less defensively than in less structured organisations.

Meetings

Any process of open decision making is illusory. Decisions taken and agreed in formal meetings, minuted and scheduled for implementation, may never happen. Meanwhile a different decision has been taken by someone else and implemented by his subordinates and allies.

Meetings are usually unstructured and informal. The smaller the meeting the more unstructured it is. They may start with three or four people, a few more may come in, a few may go. It may not always be clear why some people are there at all. Sometimes it feels like meetings are merely social gatherings to reinforce a sense of togetherness. You may get the impression that nothing is happening or a dozen things all at once. The purpose of meetings is to enable the decision takers to evaluate the mood of the others, to sense supporters and test the water, not usually to make decisions.

It is difficult to impose an agenda, although it is always worthwhile trying if you are in a position to do so. Otherwise discussion may be interminable. There is a tendency to overanalyse and split hairs – *spaccare il capello in quattro*. A large proportion of meetings end without a satisfactory conclusion, in which case they are always reconvened.

A meeting is often a stage for exhibiting eloquence, personality and status and is consequently a free-for-all of opinions, comment and ideas. Everyone is entitled to make a contribution, is listened to and apparently agreed with. The weight of the idea resides not in the idea itself but in the importance and influence of the speaker. Newcomers or junior people will be paid the courtesy of a hearing, their contribution welcomed and accepted but somehow left out at the end.

If a proposal is to be put to a meeting it is often advisable to clear it with each of the participants beforehand. Then they will react constructively. If a new idea is sprung on a meeting everyone will automatically object.

Opinions must not be imposed but agreed to. Making a decision on a vote is rarely a good tactic unless you know it will be unanimous. While people will not publicly go out on a limb to fight for a minority view, they will not submit to a majority decision. They will abandon the group or undermine its work from the inside. The guiding principle is not to offend the *dignità* of a dissident, but give him or her time to change opinion and to save face. If there are signs of entrenched positions the skilled chairperson will often adjourn the meeting. When it is reconvened, after some subtle lobbying, the objections will have disappeared.