





Britain & France

Partners for the Millennium



**Forewords by
Prime Minister Tony Blair
& President Jacques Chirac**



Doing Business in the Two Countries: Some Practical Psychology

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The French and the British act out their relationship like two old lovers, as passionate in their squabbles as in their lovemaking, envious, jealous, wary, needy and admiring of each other, attracted like two opposites yet remaining as different as Mars and Venus and subconsciously aware that, although they will always be part of each other's lives, marriage presents certain practical difficulties.

Others have and will continue to provide historical, religious, social and political explanations to help the French and the British understand their two great cultures. Erudite sources from Ardagh to Zeldin, from de Tocqueville to Daudy abound. There is much truth in their explanations and in the countless others that fill our libraries.

The fact that the two nations are historical enemies is, for example, certainly still deeply rooted in their collective psyches. Their subconscious mistrust of the other finds an escape valve in the occasional phoney wars which break out between them, thankfully now confined to disputes about agricultural produce rather than territorial gain.

The fundamental differences in religious philosophy between their two institutional religions, Protestantism and Catholicism, undoubtedly affects the individual citizen's perception of his or her place in society with father figures and obedience being central to the latter and a strong sense of egalitarianism and mistrust of authority prevailing in the former.

Furthermore, differences should come as no surprise when two such opposing cultural systems are also such close neighbours and important trading partners. As, from a sociological point of view, the French and the British fall into different cultural categories, it is natural that they should not only think differently but also approach problems from different premises. French society is far more influenced by human factors than British. In Britain, time tends to be more *linear*. Individuals concentrate better on single tasks, the parameters of which are precisely defined. For the French, time takes on the shape of a spider's web where individuals are multi-tasked and glean information from a variety of sources rather than from a single source that has voluntarily shared it with them.

Faced with the existing panoply of analyses about the French and the British, are there any easy lessons or quick fixes for those seeking to do business at either end of the Tunnel? Is it possible to assist the bemused businessperson contemplating putting a toe in the water?

The good news is that of course the French and the British can each learn to understand the other better. However, they can only do this if they are prepared to follow two golden rules - the first is to stop assuming that just because they are neighbours, they are necessarily alike; or, to put it even more simply, to remember about Mars and Venus. The second rule, which is more difficult to follow, is actually to try and understand, indeed to visualise, how each perceives the behaviour of the other.

IN PRACTICE

What follows is a modest and far from exhaustive attempt to help the uninitiated in this regard.

The French perspective

Starting from the premise that the British are sometimes perceived to be aloof, egotistical and strangely silent and reticent, even occasionally rude and arrogant, advice to them could possibly include the following.

The French think that you talk in code (which you do), that you are not direct (which you are not) and often you do not mean what you say (which is true). Do try and spell things out more and say what you mean rather than apologise for your views so much so that they become obfuscated. Don't tell a Frenchman that there is a slight problem if in fact the company is on the point of insolvency. In fact, don't beat about the bush and, above all, avoid clichés that are untranslatable and merely create confusion (*mais nom de Dieu pourquoi est-ce que cet anglais nous parle de buisson?*).

The French perceive you as far too balance sheet led (although they do admire your ability in matters financial) with no interest in the finer things in life such as food, art, philosophy, literature, sex and politics. This view is based on the fact that you never allude to them in a business context and that you seem to believe that the sole purpose of a business lunch is to conduct business. It is not. One of its purposes is to get to know you better because great attention is played to human relationships in French culture and therefore in French business. Do not forget about the importance of trust. Long term relationships count for a lot.

The French view you as sometimes unstructured and illogical in your thinking. They believe that you concentrate too much on the detail rather than the bigger and longer-term picture. This can be interpreted as shallowness. Try not to run away entirely from the "vision thing". After all it has given rise to many first class products. Do not forget too that if you want the French to understand your point of view, you will need to apply some logic to your arguments rather than base your opinion on instinct or gut reaction.

The French worry that you sometimes appear too informal (read disrespectful), too lacking in protocol (read disdainful of authority) and too eager to rush them into a decision (read lacking in manners). Go easy - remember that French society tends to be more hierarchical with a greater respect paid, at least superficially, to authority than in Britain. Rushing the French is likely to be counterproductive.

The British perspective

Starting from the premise that the French are sometimes perceived as unruly and undisciplined, even occasionally rude and arrogant, advice might include the following.

The British find your behaviour at business meetings very worrying. This is because meetings to the British fulfil a very different function. For the British, a meeting is not a forum for unstructured discussion (unless it has been specifically defined in advance as a brainstorming session) but is an opportunity to reach decisions. The length of the action list that emerges at its conclusion will judge the success of a meeting. Do not assume therefore that the British instinctively realise that the chief decision-makers in your company are outside the meeting. By telling them where the final authority lies you will avoid them perceiving you as sharp or worse, dishonest. Finally, remember that the British find it very disconcerting and disrespectful when you turn up late for a meeting or when you all talk at the same time.

The British often find you over-formal and believe that you take yourselves too seriously. Remember that informality and early friendliness do not for them equate to frivolity or a lack of respect. The British will not take advantage of

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you any more or any less simply because they address you by your first name rather than Monsieur le President Directeur General. The opposite is usually true since they instinctively find the reliance on titles in a business context somewhat comical. The British tend to understate everything, in particular their own importance. Remember the story about the British Nobel prize-winner reluctantly admitting that he knew *a little* about quantum physics.

The British are not used to your concept of good faith in contractual negotiations. Remember that the main tool of the British businessperson will be a contract that is much longer and more detailed than anything you are familiar with. This is because the British are attempting in their contracts to reproduce all the safeguards that in France the law and the judges provide you with. However, do not automatically interpret this as an attempt to deceive you. It is more a manifestation of the importance of self-help and self reliance - an acceptance that there is no guardian angel to save the day in times of conflict. Treat contracts in the same way you might treat insurance policies and spend time checking their exact wording.

The British get confused by your negotiating style which at times can seem to them cunning, sometimes even stubborn, although that may not be your intention. They cannot understand why you do not simplify the entire process by presenting your demands up front and at an early stage. Try to remember that to the British compromise is not a dirty word. Rather it represents common sense and is viewed as something that is eminently practical, a quality that is highly respected in business dealings.

SUMMARY

Two lovers with still a lot to learn about each other - perhaps.

Familiarity has bred a certain amount of complacency into French and British efforts to understand each other. More work needs to be done in the field of cross-cultural understanding and this must be done "en amont", up-front, on the first day of doing business, not on day 10. If not, business will continue to be plagued by those small but unpleasant *malentendus* which, if not checked, risk jeopardising deals which in all other respects are highly beneficial to both sides.

When that stage is passed, it will be possible to move onto the next. The French author, Antoine de Saint Exupery, once wrote "*Aimer, ce n'est pas se regarder l'un l'autre, c'est regarder ensemble dans la même direction*". That direction, on the eye of the millennium, must be to a commitment to create stronger and better European businesses. ■