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Intercultural Communication "'Sorry' is a magic word"

What do Germans need to know when dealing with people from other cultures?

Good communications are like a dance with certain rules of etiquette. Like paying compliments, for instance. This may seem toadying to us, but in many cultures, compliments are a natural part of the conversation. Germans wishing to avoid offending their opposite numbers abroad must start by shifting from the content to the relationship level.

How does that work?

Imagine you're at the opera ball. It's Ladies Choice time, and you're walking up to a prospective partner. It would be totally inappropriate to say: "Good evening, my name is Sabine, I'm 42 years old, and I have a flair for accountancy." Instead, you bow to the situation and say what they expect you to say: "Would you like to dance?" And then you start by taking a turn around the floor.

(Photo)

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(Photo: Die Hoffotografen GmbH Berlin)



So it's about fulfilling the other person's expectations?

Exactly. In an international context, anything else could easily sound like a snub. But if I tackle the conversation with charm and ease, and am empathetic and attentive towards my opposite number, this creates a domino effect. Positive language evokes a positive mood. The difference between the relationship and the content level really is just one small step in the dance.

So do we all need to learn how to do small talk?

It's absolutely essential. But sadly it has no place in German conversational culture. That's because small talk is neither factual nor efficient, and indeed it is often less than honest. To us, all this 'not getting to the point' can be a source of almost physical agony. But in other cultures, small talk is a way for two people to arrive at the same level of communication. Conversation will only be possible at content level if the relationship level has been paid adequate attention first.

So asking about the weather is a good communicative strategy?

Certainly not! That would be a very strange perception of small talk. It's more about finding out what the other person enjoys talking about. Food, sport and general questions about the respective country all make good candidates: subjects in which the other person is an expert.

Politics, religion and illness are all to be avoided, and even holidays may prove an unsuitable topic. After all, we Germans have a great many holidays, and we often have more of the financial wherewithal to travel than members of other cultures.

You say we should apologise more often when dealing with international business partners. Whatever for?

It's not about who is at fault, it's about taking a de-escalating stance in a conversation. "Sorry" is a magic word. If someone at the other end of the phone says "I'm sorry, I'm afraid you've got the wrong number", the effect is quite different from that of a brusque "Wrong number!".

It really does sound nicer.

There are lots of other tricks one can use. Phrasing something as a question rather than a statement is a good strategy, for instance, because it gives the other person some leeway, and seems less like a dictate. Something else that works really well is praise. We Germans find praise almost as difficult as apology. Some English people once asked me why Germans only seem to use words like "nice", "interesting" or "good" when they want to praise something. I explained to them that words based on love, devotion or passion are almost exclusively used in private life in Germany. We may find words like "great", "outstanding" or "marvellous" hard to use, but these are in fact the true trump cards in a communicative context. For Germans, this seems paradoxical: we need to show more of our feelings to avoid offending others.