

Persuasion

Much of our daily communication aims to persuade others of our point of view. When we persuade, we want the receiver of our message to respond in an affirmative way: „Yes. I agree. I’ll go along with that. I’m with you. You’re right. I buy that.“

We attempt to persuade in many forms: when speaking on the phone, writing an email, presenting in a meeting, composing a formal report. We attempt to persuade in many interactions: with colleagues, our boss, our direct reports, as well as with customers, suppliers, and business partners.

But Germans and Americans persuade — and are persuaded — differently. These differences, if not understood, can threaten the success of their cooperation.

Decision making options, which come across persuasively in the one business culture and lead to important action, suddenly do not reach their target audience in the other. A misperception of another colleague’s logic in persuasion can lead to a misperception of her or his fundamental competence.

Misperceptions create friction and mistrust. Colleagues do not agree on issues significant to the company. The one side is seen as overly problem-oriented, critical and cautious. Opportunities are missed. The other is judged to be too optimistic, glossing over serious problems, thereby endangering the performance of the entire team.

Decisions made with broad consequences, judged by the one culture to be persuasive and therefore legitimate, are viewed by the other as suboptimal, perhaps even unjust.

The fundamental willingness to be persuaded is weakened. The situation deteriorates. The performance of the organization suffers. Yet, if understood and carefully combined, the respective strengths in approaches to persuasion can be a very valuable asset.

The goal is to minimize the problems created by the differences, while maximizing the benefits of integrating them. Americans and Germans can do that.

1. objective

German

The Germans separate message from messenger. The presenter consciously and purposely moves into the background so that the content can take center stage. Arguments should speak for themselves.

American

Americans link message and messenger. Message-content, -form and -presenter should form a unity. Americans say: „Sell yourself first, then your product or service.“

German Perception

Germans react ambivalently to linking speaker and content. An overly personalized presentation style is motivating and attractive, at the same time however, too personified. Germans expect more distance between speaker and subject.

American Perception

Americans, on the other hand, find the separation of speaker and subject as impersonal and distanced. To distance oneself from one's own content is seen as risk-averse and disinterested.

Advice to Germans

Identify yourself with your message. Use „I“. Draw on your personal experience with anecdotes. Put your heart into it. Show emotion. Give signals when you are a subjective participant in your story and when you are an objective observer.

Advice to Americans

Temper the showman in you. Be coy. Hint at almost a scepticism in your own message. Neither invite nor challenge your listeners to like or dislike you. Take yourself out of the equation, so to speak. It's all about the content not you.

2. competent

German

For Germans a core competence is the ability to identify, analyze and solve complex problems. Germans focus on problems.

American

Americans strive to see problems as opportunities. And opportunities are to be exploited. Competent is that person able to recognize opportunities in problem situations and to maximize the gains they offer.

German Perception

Interpreting a problem as an opportunity and acting too quickly signals to Germans an inability to recognize the seriousness of the situation and its dangers. Americans can appear naive.

American Perception

The German focus on the weak points of a given situation is understood by Americans as precisely that: seeing problems as problems and consciously seeking them out. Instead of searching for the positive in a given situation, Germans are viewed as pessimistic, negative, under circumstances destructive.

Advice to Germans

Remain problem-oriented. It is a German strength. But choose different, softer, less direct, words. Americans are quite capable of discerning between serious and less serious problems. Establish more balance between your German problem-orientation and American optimism. Not all problems have to be addressed or even solved, in order to move forward.

Advice to Americans

Reduce your natural American optimism. Show more attention to the potential down-side of a given situation. Acknowledge the problems as they are. Address them directly and openly. Not all problems are challenges. Not every cloud has a silver lining. Do not fear being negative and pessimistic with your German colleagues.

3. analytical

German

Germans are systematic in their thinking. Complexity is understood only by understanding how its component parts interrelate and interact. And a component part can only be understood via its role within the whole. Germans focus on theories and models.

American

Americans prefer to break down complexity into its component parts, in order to focus on the essential, so that action can be taken. Americans are sceptical of theory, focusing instead on facts and experience.

German Perception

Facts and experience, without a convincing description of the big picture, are not persuasive to Germans. To concentrate on the key variables often means to misunderstand or overlook other important aspects. Americans are often judged to be superficial and over-simplifying.

American Perception

The German inclination to paint the big picture, especially with the help of theory, can make a professorial and arrogant impression on American ears. Comprehensiveness comes across as long-winded, overly complicating and impractical. Americans react impatiently.

Advice to Germans

A wholistic approach is fine, but be careful not to get tangled up on theory. Warn your audience when you need to go into detail in order to get a particular message across. Leave out facts and factors which are not pertinent. Do not be comprehensive for the sake of comprehensiveness. If Americans need more supporting information, they will request it. Anticipate those questions. Have the data ready. Questions are a sign of interest, and not that you are unprepared.

Advice to Americans

Take the time to explain the analysis which led to your conclusions. Your German colleagues want to know the what (message), why (reasons) and how (methodology). Go into much more detail. Include facts and information about various factors. Germans rarely save information for the question & answer part of the presentation. Give them the info up front. In the German context, the fewer the questions during Q&A, the more persuasive the presentation.

4. realistic

German

Germans define realistic as understanding reality. To understand the present, is to understand how it became so - the past.

American

To be realistic is to understand what is possible. The possible is determined by not only by present circumstances, but also by the ability to shape a new future, To be realistic is to envision a future. Forward movement often demands moving away from the past. Americans are future-oriented.

German Perception

American visions are often not grounded or rooted in an accurate understanding of the status quo. Americans want to move forward without first establishing their starting point and direction.

American Perception

Too much emphasis on the present as a product of the past is seen as backward-looking. A vision of the future, forward movement, demands moving away from the past.

Advice to Germans

Provide the historical context. But again, let your listeners know beforehand that you need to tell the full story. Your aim is for all to have a common understanding of the status quo before you can consider how best to move forward together.

Advice to Americans

Try to hold back your natural tendency to jump from the present into the future. Take the time to explain the context of a situation. This will lengthen the presentation. Do your homework and demonstrate it.

5. persuasive

German

To persuade is to inform persuasively. Persuasive argumentation guides an audience to its logical conclusion. Selling the conclusion is not necessary.

American

To persuade is to sell persuasively. Persuasive argumentation leads the audience to a choice. The audience is asked to make a choice.

German Perception

Americans sell. They put on a show. They don't persuade. Information is not presented in a professional and expert way. The audience is confronted with either buying or rejecting.

American Perception

Germans inform only. They give academic lectures. They don't sell. The audience is left hanging.

Advice to Germans

Overcome your inhibition to recommend a clear choice (your choice) among the options. Ask for the order. The worst that can happen is you'll get a „no“. Life will go on.

Advice to Americans

Do not confront your audience with the "buy"-question. Americans can easily come across as "pushy used-cars salesmen". Take almost a "take it or leave it" attitude.