

Module 4: Are the French really arrogant?

Presenter: In today's interview we're going to take a step back and look at the way the French operate. In international relationships, we often learn about our partners' cultural traits and of course, rightly so. But it's also very interesting to know how we are perceived by our foreign partners, how we can become aware of our shortcomings and also, how we can get rid of them! First of all, we all know that, even though France is known in many positive ways throughout the world, the French, or rather their attitude is unanimously classed as being 'arrogant'. Do we have any keys to understand and explain this?

Catou: Yes, we do. We can start by talking about the fact that individualism is considered very important in France.

Presenter: I thought that it was especially the case in the United States.

Catou: Yes, that's true, but it doesn't come in the same form as in France and the Americans have a great capacity to rally for the group. In France, an individual finds it difficult to 'forget him/herself' when part of a group, to take on the group's objectives, codes and obligations. In France, from early childhood, we cultivate the ability to differentiate ourselves. At school, from a very young age, we're not merely asked to repeat what the teacher's said, but to add our 'personal touch'. What's more, this partly explains the creativity that can be found in our country. The French Revolution, far from giving the French equality, on the contrary, gave each person the impression that they could rise above the others and enjoy the privileges that were available!

Presenter: You mentioned differentiating oneself, but how?

Catou: Take meetings in France, for example, why do they take so long? In the interview about the notion of time, we said that we tended to have a fairly flexible vision of time. That's true, but there's also the fact that each person gives his/her opinion! You *must* have an opinion, even if, as we saw in the talk about power distance, subordinates' opinions are not always taken into account. Expressing yourself is important, and you need to do it with flare; rhetoric and debate are utmost. These long, sometimes animated meetings will often exasperate our partners, particularly people from English-speaking countries, who are much more pragmatic than us. And what's more, in France, no matter what anyone says, interrupting is not badly looked upon; on the contrary, it shows that you're interested, that you're passionate about the subject! We don't hold back when it comes to arguing about ideas, and it can get rather heated. Imagine how uneasy our Asian partners feel when confronted with such an outburst! But here in France, it's unlikely there will be any repercussions and that fact people got carried away is quickly forgotten.

Presenter: You say that Anglo-Saxons are pragmatic, so what type of approach should we have if we lack this pragmatism?

Catou: We tend to place much more value on anything that's considered intellectual or conceptual, rather than pragmatic or concrete. Just look at our intellectual tradition during the Enlightenment; take the prestige associated with a degree from one of the *Grandes Ecoles*, or the importance of those intellectual elites who share power both politically and in top companies. It is difficult to succeed in France if you have a purely technical background without having attended a *Grande Ecole*. This is not at all the case in Germany where, even if you are oriented towards non-intellectual studies, it is still possible to have a brilliant career in a company thanks to your expertise. In France, giving prestige to this intellectual capacity has other consequences: our way of dealing with issues is very general, very conceptual. Contrary to the Japanese or the Swiss, we are interested in the broad outline, the main aspects of a project. This is where the battle of great ideas and concepts begins. The French are often much less keen on post-project work, which is full of details and pragmatic questions.

Animateur : But this downstream stage of a project means that you're getting closer to the market, to the customer, does it not?

Catou: Absolutely! And at this stage we get to the less 'noble' tasks than that of design! I remember back in the nineties, when the students from engineering schools called us business school students, 'grocers'! Yes, that's it. Our job was simply 'to make money' by pandering to the market, whereas they were concerned with technical performance and rational perfection! Times have changed, and I think business-related jobs are recognized more now than they were before, but what remains clear is that customer relations in France still have a long way to go.

Presenter: In this climate of fierce competition, can we really allow ourselves not to consider the customer?

Catou: I think that in France, we do take the customer into consideration, but on the level of product design. Problems arise when it comes to customer relations. As proof, just look at the number of training courses given in companies to optimize these relations! The problem is that the French tend to regard customer relations as inevitably hierarchical, with the service provider or salesperson being at a disadvantage. Here in France, whatever people say, it's rarely a true honor to serve others. Salespeople tend to refuse the 'power' that money gives the customer. They therefore refuse to bow to the customers' desires if the sole aim is to clinch a sale and sometimes prefer to lose out rather than to have the impression of losing their honor. How many times have we witnessed or been a victim of this kind of sales relationship? I mentioned a couple of minutes ago that the French have trouble forgetting their individuality: they're not going to put their personality to the side and get on with the job and if they feel upset because the customer appears to be treating them in a condescending manner, they'll either make it known or show that they're not ready to get down on their knees - i.e. to forget their honor - just to carry off the sale. Here, then, is one explanation for our arrogance in customer relations and this non-standardized attitude towards the customer can present a problem with our foreign partners who don't expect to see the salespeople's personality or

sensibilities come to the fore in a sales relationship! Neither do they realize that you can get anything you want from the French once you show you go beyond what the salesperson perceives as being unequal, and you create a more personal relationship. Has no one ever said 'because it's you and you're a good sort' we'll do everything we can to deliver on time? Whereas, the very fact that you're the customer should be enough for someone to do everything they can for you, shouldn't it?

Presenter: I think that our way of looking at rules is also quite cultural.

Catou: Yes, absolutely! The French need rules but they love getting round them. Firstly, because it's a way of showing how ingenious they are and also because rules are often based on one's own specific circumstances. This is an excellent rule for everyone else, but my situation is rather particular, so it doesn't apply to me! Other highly individualistic countries comply with the rules. For example, the Germans respect rules because they allow the community to be run more efficiently. On the other hand, they don't accept as easily as the French the idea of power distance as far as authority is concerned. For the French it's the opposite, they accept authority but not rules!

Presenter: So if the French are so individualistic, what motivates them?

Catou: You're starting to understand - the French need to perform great, far-reaching achievements! Each person at his/her respective level will be motivated by going beyond what's merely required and will tend to define their scope of actions within what they consider their task to be. Don't talk about the job description as it is in the contract, because that's hardly relevant. No, what motivates them is the image they have of their job, the meaning they give to what they do, and that applies to any level of qualification or hierarchical level. This vision also leads to misunderstandings with our partners, who, on the one hand, have trouble defining the scope French people's responsibilities and on the other, find it hard to meet the demands of French managers.

Presenter: Why is that?

Catou: Because French managers put their subordinates in a very tricky position. As we saw in the talk about power distance, they often exert fairly strong control over their subordinates and delegate less than other managers. At the same time, they place great value on autonomy and expect their subordinates to use their initiative. The subordinates, however, have their own ideas of what's expected and use their initiative in this way, which is not always what the managers are expecting! So, what should I do if there's an electrical problem in my workshop? Do I turn off the machines because looking after the workers' safety is part of my job, or do I stick to what's written in my job description, which doesn't even mention this? If I'm French, I'll certainly take the first option, and if I'm American, I'll be bound to take the second. We can well imagine the problems that will arise if the manager is one nationality and the subordinate another!

Presenter: So, is it really that difficult for our partners to work with the French?

Catou: No more than with other nationalities, as each partner has their own cultural peculiarities! I think our partners appreciate our technical skills, our creativity and flexibility and the warm human relations we often create. It's important to be aware of our strengths and be proud of them, while at the same time, to work on the cultural traits that can hinder international relations. Most companies are aware of some of these problem areas and are working on them to become more efficient. I'm thinking in particular about meetings and the fact of being either pragmatic or efficient; or about relations when dealing with a difficult customer in which the company deals with the problem by putting the customer at the center of their concern. Some are also aware of the consequences of having too much power distance between the manager and his/her subordinates, which slows down the decision-making process, saps energy and demotivates the teams. Other cultural traits are not as easy to identify; I'm referring here to our tendency to place the individual at the center of the system and of the difficulties that result when it's a question of giving in to group demands. In international relations, before trying to understand what makes others tick, let's develop the ability to recognize how others perceive us!