

What your international negotiation partner really thinks of you

American businessmen are often portrayed in the media (and business school case studies) as uninformed and aggressive in international negotiations. Those are mere stereotypes, but for all of the exceptions to this description, it reflects how many of your business partners look at you before beginning negotiations. Below, we will discuss some of the reasons for this, and then highlight how you can use these expectations to your advantage in future business dealings.

To my American business clients, I often recommend some readings on cultural awareness to help them understand how the U.S. business negotiating environment is unique and not the ‘norm’ around the world.

Walking into international business discussions without a solid understanding of how culture plays a major role in negotiation goals and styles is a sure-fire way to either fail miserably or give up value and concessions in the process of pursuing a deal.



There are a number of good resources out there to help people understand these nuances. For example, [Sheida Hodge's book Global Smarts](#) is a fun and relevant resource even two decades after its initial publication. One of the vignettes in her book include observations from a German business partner on how Germans view their U.S. counterparts. I've included a paraphrased portion of these below, as they are both damning and amusing:



Samson Atlantic

“American businesspeople have the reputation of being the toughest in the world, but they are, in many respects, the easiest to deal with. That is because their business philosophy is uncomplicated. Their aim is to make as much money as they can as quickly as they can....This single-minded pursuit of profits results in their being seen as ruthless.

In business dealings, Americans show the following tendencies:

- They like to go it alone without checking with the head office. Anything goes unless it has been restricted (In Germany, everything is prohibited unless it is permitted.)
- They become informal immediately, taking off their jackets, using first names, and discussing personal details.
- They give the impression of being naïve by speaking only English and by offering trust and friendship too soon.
- They use humor even when the other side fails to understand or regards it as out of place.
- They put their cards on the table right at the start, then proceed on an offer, counter-offer basis.”

The list goes on, but the last sentence is especially telling, as our negotiation habits are known around the world, and do in fact differ from what other cultures expect and relate to in negotiations. It has been my unfortunate experience to see this play out at a very senior level with US diplomatic negotiations, where an alleged expert negotiator from the U.S. will continue to offer modifications and concessions on an agreement, waiting in vain as their international counterparts sit there, stone-faced but extremely happy, and offer nothing in return to the over-eager Americans. They do not play by our rule book, and why should they when we are in such a hurry to clinch a deal and damn the consequences?





Cultural understanding is of course a two-way street, and as the list from our German business colleague above shows – not all stereotypes are true. Certainly, there are American business people who are savvy enough to look beyond mere profit in negotiations, and many who are multi-lingual and approach negotiations in a more nuanced way than the list above suggests. But the stereotypes teach us something valuable about how our approaches and perspectives differ.

Sticking with the German culture (one which is in reality not that far from the U.S. norms compared to more exotic locations, and where I lived for over a decade), another great observer and consultant, John Otto Magee, published a series of articles in the global addition of the German business paper [Handelsblatt](#) earlier this year that were also very insightful observations about how German and American businesspeople view each other. In my [favorite article](#), he hits on a number of key issues. I will focus on a few below, but recommend reading the whole article – it is short, accurate, and very humorous (and I linked it above, so no excuse to miss out).

Herr Magee identifies two issues that are worth highlighting here. First is that even our methods of communication (not language, because you know that the German business people are excellent English speakers so negotiations will be *auf Englisch*) differ and can cause friction immediately “Germans say what they mean. Mean what they say. Don’t beat around the bush. Don’t use euphemisms. Clear, direct, unambiguous. Get to the point. Right away. To Americans, as to many other English-speaking people, the Germans thus appear impatient, obnoxious, at times even insulting.” True, true and true again. By the way, it must be physically painful for Germans to say ‘I am sorry’, because in eleven years in country, I heard it only a handful of times, and only after complete disasters. That is wholly different from the U.S. approach (and customer service perspective).

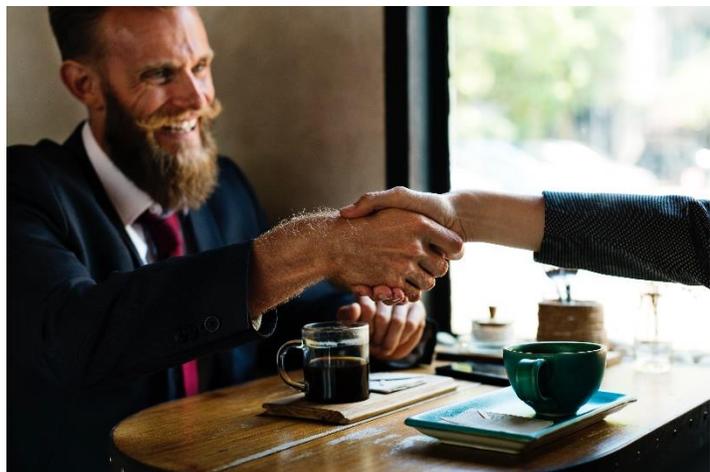
He goes on to discuss negotiation perspectives, which do differ. “Many Americans I know call their German colleagues Dr. No. (Behind their backs, of course.) More accurate would be Herr or Frau Dr. Nein. The German Nein is indeed more rule than exception. It can come hard and fast. But this Nein, depending on the context, can range from hard to

flexible....the American ‘no’ comes in the form of a conditional yes signaling the reasons why assistance is regrettably not possible. To Americans it is a sign of professionalism and finesse to communicate rejection in a positive, supportive, affirmative way. This is not easy for Germans to decipher. Germans want clarity. But a ‘no’ in the form of a conditional yes sends mixed signals. The resulting misunderstandings can get ugly. Germans may think they have an agreement, whereas the Americans communicated no such thing. Germans will then conclude that the Americans are *unzuverlässig* (unreliable). Even on minor matters, to be *unzuverlässig* is a character flaw in Germany. *Unzuverlässig* is a label which can take a painfully long time to have peeled off your forehead.” To foot stomp his point, getting tarred as *unzuverlässig* means that you will not get their business, period. This is the same reason why one needs to be punctual in Germany. Unreliability is unforgiveable.

Here we have the double-barrel of how culture and language can both undermine negotiations. Not only do American businesspeople often have a poor cultural approach to negotiations, even when they are negotiating with partners in English, they don’t necessarily understand the communication that comes back to them *in their own language*, due to lack of a cultural prism to clarify what has, in fact, been agreed. Now the key point: how do Americans use these expectations and stereotypes to their **advantage**?

There are two things that you can do to take advantage of our reputation as negotiators. The first is research and education, and the second is to adjust the rule book by which you play.

The first, the concept of research and education, is as broad and deep as it sounds. Do NOT enter into negotiation with a foreign partner





without knowing a substantial amount about the cultural and historical baggage they are bringing with them. This will not only give you the empathy to better understand their cultural approach to negotiation, it will allow you to guess at what is driving their specific stance on the items under negotiation. Do you think it is too hard to do this because of time? Then hire someone to feed you a condensed version of what you need. Several days of structured background can arm you with critically important information on your counterpart's background and web of influences, and the time you spent on that research will pay more than enough dividends to make up for the time you took away from other professional tasks. In fact, the effect is cumulative: as you study more cultures, language and histories, the insights you glean will pay dividends in other business negotiation arenas. If your management does not agree with that assessment, show them this [article](#) (or any of the other many, many related reports) to help change their mind. Or have them call me to advocate on your team's behalf. The fact is, American negotiators (fairly or unfairly) are pigeonholed as superficial and culturally tone-deaf. The time that you take to disprove this impression as you start negotiations with a potential business partner will not only win you some goodwill, it will cause your negotiation partner to reevaluate you, your intent, and their strategy in the midst of negotiations.

The second thing that you can do to take advantage of your national reputation is to adjust your rule book. Do not offer a concession first. Take the time to talk around issues and expectations before you show any text or get down to 'brass tacks.' Leave the lawyers on coffee break for a while (but for the sake of the lawyers' health, promise not to finalize anything in their absence). Study the negotiation styles of [different cultures](#) and [regions](#). By changing your approach away from the aggressive, deal-oriented approach that has given American businesspeople the reputation as impatient, money-oriented cowboys (which you of course are not), you will put your negotiation partner off their stride and likely land a better deal for both sides in the fullness of time. With your hard-earned cultural savvy and updated, broader negotiations rulebook, you will benefit from the



Samson Atlantic

(mis)steps of those that have come before you and can truly negotiate with confidence and critical cultural insight.

Kirk Samson is the owner of Samson Atlantic LLC, a Chicago-based international business consulting company which offers market research, political risk assessment, and international negotiations assistance. Mr. Samson is a former U.S. diplomat and international law advisor who lived and worked in ten different countries.