ADR Bulletin
ADR Bulletin

Volume 12 | Number 1 Article 2

1-1-2010

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Maria van der Walt
Bond University, maria.vanderwalt@student.bond.edu.au

Recommended Citation
van der Walt, Maria (2010) "French negotiation culture," *ADR Bulletin*: Vol. 12: No. 1, Article 2.
Available at: http://epublications.bond.edu.au/adr/vol12/iss1/2

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Cross-cultural negotiation dynamics

French negotiation culture

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Introduction

France is a world leader in many fields, including tourism and trade, and a cornerstone of the European Union. Successful outcomes in negotiations with this world-leader are of utmost importance to any western nation. This article will briefly consider typical western negotiation styles, and thereafter consider French culture and French negotiation styles, focusing on the problems, concerns and difficulties that a western negotiator from Australia or the United States might encounter when entering negotiations with French nationals. For the sake of brevity, United States or Australian negotiators will be collectively referred to 'western negotiators'. While it is recognised that great diversity exists among the French in mannerisms, ideologies, protocol and other aspects of life, French culture will be described in a general manner for the purposes of comparing the typical French negotiator to the typical western negotiator.

Lewicki's concepts and categories for intercultural negotiations will be employed to highlight the cultural differences and differing negotiation tactics of the western and French cultures.[1] Based on the work of several other theorists, Lewicki[2] refers to 10 ways that culture can influence negotiations.[3] These areas will be considered with reference to French culture and the French style of negotiation. The dimensions of culture as suggested by Hofstede, and discussed by Lewicki, will then be addressed with respect to French culture and western interaction therewith.

The western negotiation model

Negotiation models and tactics in western societies are tactical and calculated. Fisher and Ury accurately describe many of western negotiation tactics in their work *Getting to Yes.*[4] The Harvard Negotiation Project also outlines four pillars that are vital to all negotiations, namely:

- separating the people from the problem;
- having an interest-based focus, rather than a positional focus;
- inventing options for mutual gain; and
- insisting on objective criteria.

Similarly, negotiation models taught in Australia are tactical, systematic and practical with principles that are easy to employ. Basic step-by-step procedure models are taught, outlining each stage of the negotiation. Mantras taught are often similar, if not identical, to American mantras, such as 'separating the people from the problem,' and 'focusing on interests rather than positions'.

Western models of negotiation also set up a structure beginning with broader discussions of both common and individual goals and interests, and then later moving to more specific discussions of each particular point. Negotiations are also typically organised through the use of an agenda, agreed upon in the early stages of the negotiation. This agenda determining the structure of discussions will, once agreed upon, generally provide the framework for further discussions. Offers may be introduced after discussion of the various items on the agenda. Offers may be made as a package offer, or be made conditionally or unconditionally on each item at a time.

It is to be noted that while this is the general approach to western intra-cultural negotiation, this model and its principles are not necessarily employed uniformly across the United States and Australia. Both cultures use a variety of negotiation approaches, and adapt and alter these approaches when engaging in cross-cultural negotiation. The process of adapting and altering negotiation tactics, as evident from the discussion that follows, is vital to successful negotiations with French nationals.

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Lewicki's concepts as to how culture may influence negotiation

1. Definition of negotiation

The French definition of negotiation is in some respects similar, and in other respects vastly different, to the western model. Cogan states 'the idea that negotiation consists of a series of elements and stages … is both unappealing and unpersuasive to most

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French negotiators. The French … think that negotiation comes naturally.'[5]

In contrast to this, 'United States … negotiators concentrate on their own performance and winning and negotiations are episodic.'[6]

Australian negotiators are also inclined to work with a systematic approach, with clear tactical phases. This reveals the distinct possibility for mutual frustration in a cross-cultural negotiation between French negotiators who might feel restricted or patronised by a systematic approach, and western negotiators who might feel a sense of disorganisation in a less structured negotiation. It is vital for western negotiators to be wary of the possibility that French negotiators will want to remain free from definitive structure, and perhaps find ways to bring an informal structure to the negotiating table, in a manner that appears spontaneous and unrehearsed.

One of the most basic differences is found in the fact that, 'the French love to talk, and they don't find arguing rude.'[7]

This is quite distinct from western cultures, which generally view arguing as a disintegration of relationships and in a professional realm only talk on a moderate level, and only when necessary. However similar to the western approach the French believe that, 'the contract seems to be more important than the relationship.'[8] Yet despite focusing on the contract, the French do place emphasis on maintaining contact between the parties post-negotiation, and strive to maintain long-term relationships, a desire which can be of benefit to western negotiators.

Furthermore Baudry explains that the French have a belief that, 'no one wins without another losing'.[9] Baudry notes that, in contrast to the French belief the western counterpart is one of abundance and mutual gain. This approach might become prevalent during negotiations where, even though concessions are generally made by both parties, a French person might be more inclined to feel that, 'I have given something up, and therefore I have lost and you have won.' Western negotiators might counter this feeling by making the first concession, or by placing added emphasis on French 'wins' or 'gains' and underplaying French concessions.

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2. Selection of negotiators

While some cultures are traditional in their gender perception, and therefore pay less heed to female negotiators, the French 'don't make any difference between men and women. The person across the table is judged for what he or she represents and not on whether they are a man or a woman.' This is also similar with regard to age, and although a more mature negotiator might be accorded more respect from the onset, younger negotiators will not be dismissed or disrespected on the mere basis of youth.

Furthermore Lewicki notes that collectivist cultures, such as the French culture, are more inclined to cultivate and sustain long-term relationships as opposed to negotiators from individualistic cultures, such as the United States and Australia, who will more frequently swap negotiators, based on short-term criteria.[10] If

western negotiators were to pursue a long-term relationship with a particular French company or institution, it might be useful to maintain the use of the same negotiators in order to create a sense of familiarity and build closer relations.

3. Protocol

American and Australian protocols, although fairly distinct in the business realm, are not as strongly developed as the French equivalent. While titles are sometimes used in Australia and the United States, for example in the courtroom, it is not common to the European extent. 'Many European countries, [for example] France … are very formal and not using the proper title when addressing someone is considered insulting.'[11] This means that western negotiations need to be wary of potential French co-negotiators who might take offence at the incorrect use or the omission of a title.

Although slightly less essential, it is also necessary for western negotiators to be aware of greeting practices of a foreign culture. French are renowned for their 'kiss-on-both-cheeks' greeting. However this is not acceptable in a business setting, with near or total strangers. Instead

> French all shake hands. It's not a strong handshake in the American style, with a long serious moment of eye contact. Rather it is a brief holding of the hands with an even briefer visual acknowledgement, but it is most important in French greetings among all acquaintances.[12]

Although differences are minor, they are important to take into consideration, as a western negotiator who attempts to simulate French culture by means of a kiss on the cheek could run the risk of appearing foolish, while failure to extend a handshake might appear discourteous.

4. Communication

Verbal and non-verbal communication is a vital part of cross-cultural communication, as every nation has a distinct manner of speaking and interacting that will not always be correctly perceived by foreigners. Taylor refers to the 'French "No" Syndrome'.

> In France some people will say 'No' even before you finish the question. What they usually mean is 'I don't know, that's not my job' or 'I don't understand you' or 'I'm busy now'.[13]

This is similar to the Japanese tendency to use 'hai' when they do not necessarily mean 'yes'.[14]

During the course of a negotiation within French culture, use of the word 'no' can lead to misunderstandings, and can even cause western negotiators to believe that a certain offer or proposition has been rejected when it has not. However if aware of this cultural tendency, a western negotiator can employ the listen-acknowledge-reframe-summarise technique to ensure that in that particular instance, 'no' does, in fact, mean 'no.'

Another important aspect of communication is eye contact. Taylor notes that 'making eye-contact is a statement of equality in France … a recognition of the other person's identity.'[15] This clearly suggests that if a Western negotiator were to make minimal eye contact during negotiations, it may be regarded as impolite, or disrespectful. While westerners often find prolonged eye-contact to be disconcerting, Lewicki

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urges the western negotiator to 'always look directly into your French associate's eye when making an important point.'[16] This might ensure that you are taken seriously by your French counterpart, and can also be seen as a mark of respect and equality.

Furthermore the French often speak with their hands, reflecting their Mediterranean heritage. While it is neither necessary nor acceptable for western negotiators to copy this French mannerism it is necessary to note that the prevalent use of hand gestures has led to the French belief that 'putting one's hands in one's pocket is impolite,'[17] and may be misconstrued as a sign of passivity or a lack of power.

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Taylor also notes that the French will often employ rudeness as a tactical approach when initiating conversation.

> Purposeful rudeness comes mostly from feelings of insecurity ... because they can't understand you. Some assume because of their class or status, they must 'put you down' first because they are afraid you will put them down.[18]

Thus fear of being rejected or insulted is often expressed through rudeness, which is a reflection of insecurity rather than of true dislike. She suggests that rather than returning an insult, the best option might be to try being polite, as it might improve their disposition.

Finally, it is also important to note that, unlike Americans or Australians in general, 'The French are argumentative.' However,

> ... it is a point of view presented, not an unpleasant attack. The French are quick to criticise everybody and everything, but that is often only to make an opportunity for discussion, for an exercise in the art of conversation.

If unaware of this culture dimension, such style of communication could potentially be frustrating to western negotiators, who might be inclined to view the French inclination to criticise as a personal attack, or view the desire for discussion as a waste of time. However if western negotiators are aware of these facets of the French culture, they can be interpreted correctly, that is, as a probative desire to gain information and a greater understanding of the issues at hand.

5. Time sensitivity

The way that different cultures perceive time can radically influence the proceedings of the negotiation. Baudry explains that American culture is monochronic, meaning that there is one time for each thing and one thing for each time.[19] Lewicki also notes that

> In the United States, people tend to respect time by appearing for meetings at an appointed hour, being sensitive to not wasting the time of other people and generally holding that 'faster' is better than 'slower' because it symbolises high productivity.[20]

In contrast to this, it is noted the French manner is one of 'endemic lateness',[21] and might be an expression of power, whereby individuals with greater status or power demonstrate their 'right' to be late, and that they are not bound by time. In practice this might mean that when French negotiators arrive late at a scheduled meeting a western negotiator may misconstrue such tardiness as disrespect or carelessness,

when, in fact, it is a mere cultural expression of hierarchy, and freedom from time constraints.

A practical way for western negotiators to side-step frustrations could be to ensure that they always have additional work with them to keep them busy in the event that French negotiators are late. The time could also be utilised to do extra preparation or to familiarise themselves with the setting.

However, being on time and turning up on the agreed hour is only one obvious manner in which time will affect cross-cultural negotiations. Time will also prove to be a relevant factor during the negotiation proceedings. Taylor notes that 'nothing of significance happens in France without a lengthy discussion and deliberation'.[22] Americans and Australians tend to negotiate with a greater awareness of time, aiming for fast, and high-productivity negotiations.[23] However this is not true for the French, who, as noted above, enjoy embarking on long discussions, and thus prefer to discuss each matter separately, and at great length. The focus for them is on the quality of the discussion rather than the speed of it. This might inevitably lead to stumbling blocks in cross-cultural negotiators, as western negotiators aim to show respect to the time restrictions of French negotiators, but in reality, appear to be showing a disregard for their desire to deliberate, and to discuss issues in great depth.

6. Risk propensity

Western society has a high risk propensity, Lewicki notes that 'some European cultures are quite conservative [risks takers]'.[24] An alternative view taken by Fischer-Sitzwohl et al is that the

> French are said to be fairly high risk takers, probably because of their creativity and also their feeling of intellectual superiority. But … the French always like to discuss every little detail during the negotiation, which considerably reduces uncertainty … so we could say that French are risk takers but in an environment they know fairly well.[25]

Based on the view of Fischer-Sitzwohl et al, it may be of great benefit to Western negotiators to create an environment that feels comfortable, and to ensure that French negotiators feel a sense of security and familiarity throughout the negotiation. They would, in such an atmosphere, then be prompted to take greater risks, which may consequently take the form of concessions, admissions, or the formation of an agreement. If at ease they might also be more open to unusual or creative suggestions from western negotiators or be more inclined to overcome their concerns and to set aside the fear that prohibited them from finalising an agreement.

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7. Groups versus individuals

The perception that a particular culture holds with regards to individualism or collectivism may also have a definitive impact on the negotiation proceedings.

As noted earlier, the United States and Australia are both largely individualistic societies. However Lewicki points out that 'Negotiators from other countries [for example]

France do not always share this ideology [individualism], and may instead stress group rights as more important than individual rights and public investment as better allocation of resources than private investment.'

According to Hofstede, France is ranked 10th in the world for individualism, while the United States and Australia are ranked first and second respectively.[26] This could lead to potential difficulties within negotiations. However when proposing solutions, western negotiators may keep this factor of the French culture in mind, aiming to propose solutions that benefit to the greater good. The collectivist nature of the French might also mean that decisions will be reached collectively, and that French negotiators will consult with one another, and with their superiors more frequently than western negotiators. Their collectivist approach will also be of benefit to western negotiators in that

> ... negotiators from collectivist cultures will strongly depend on cultivating and sustaining a long-term relationship whereas negotiators from individualistic cultures may be more likely to swap negotiators, using whatever short-term criteria seem appropriate.[27]

8. Nature of agreements

> It has been said that the French prefer a specific form of agreement because they like to go over details while negotiating, so they'd rather have a detailed contract with all the possibilities.[28]

This is similar to the western approach, where contracts are also crafted with great attention to detail. Lewicki notes that 'in the United States, agreements are typically based on logic, are often formalized and are enforced through the legal system if such standards are not honoured.'[29] This will create congruity in a cross-cultural negotiation, as both parties will tend to recognise the importance of agreeing upon the finer points of a negotiation, and formalising such agreements in writing. However, Fischer-Sitzwohl et al note that for the French, the important part in the negotiation is 'the deal and not the relationship'.[30] Although this appears to contradict Lewicki's belief about collectivist cultures, including the French, tending to pursue the formation of long-term relationships, the two views may be reconciled. It is conceivable that while during the negotiation the French are primarily concerned with the importance of entering a contractual agreement that is favourable to them, they do also strive to ultimately maintain long-term relations with their opponents.

Throughout the negotiation it may be useful for western negotiators to remind French negotiators of the benefits of long-term relationships, a value which the French already hold dear, but may have temporarily suppressed in light of their greater desire to reach an agreement. This reminder will then ultimately be of benefit to both parties, serving as a common goal, and urging minor concessions from both to uphold this value.

9. Emotionalism

Lewicki notes that '[c]ulture appears to influence the extent to which negotiators display emotions'.[31] In

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general it may be said that French display emotion more openly and freely than do westerners. Within the French culture it is considered acceptable to be upset, or to display joy or frustration with a person or a situation. In contrast, western culture will generally associate the public display of emotion with weakness of character, or the inability to control oneself. 'French negotiators tend to project their feelings onto their negotiation partner. They often believe the negotiation is a war.'[32]

A western negotiator should be aware of the greater inclination of French negotiators to display emotion, as ignorance of this point could lead to western negotiators feeling affronted or offended by emotional speeches that appear to be targeted at them individually. Once it is understood that French displays of emotion during a negotiation are targeted at resolving issues, and creating resolutions, western negotiators may feel more comfortable in such situations and be able to correctly identify the opinions and concerns underlying the emotion.

10. Ideology

Individualism and capitalism are two of the primary ideologies held by both the United States and Australia. Lewicki states 'Negotiators from the United States generally share a common ideology about the benefits of individualism and capitalism. Americans believe strongly in individual rights, the superiority of private investment and the importance of making profit in business.'[33]

As previously discussed, France has a slightly more collectivist ideology than Western cultures. It is also stated that '[v]alues are proposed to have a direct effect when then have strong effects across several different contexts [for example] France has both monarchical and democratic traditions both of which can influence negotiation behaviour depending on the context.'[34] Similarly, despite capitalist notions, France cannot be said to be a truly capitalist nation. Rather it is displays elements of both capitalism and socialism. According to Lewicki,[35] such ideologies form part of the 'environmental context' beyond the control of the parties, and this may complicate cross-cultural negotiations. The western negotiator may heed these French ideologies by initiating propositions that will have collectivist benefits by serving a purpose for the 'greater good' of the entire company in question, or that will somehow be of benefit to the French society or economy at whole, even if such benefits are only minor.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Lewicki considers four of Hofstede's important cultural dimensions, namely

- individualism and collectivism;
- career success and quality of life;
- power distance; and
- uncertainty avoidance.

The factors relevant to the *individualism and collectivism* have already been discussed earlier in this article with regards to the French culture. While *career success and quality of life* is an important cultural dimension, this article will focus on two of Hofstede's views — *power distance* and *uncertainty avoidance*. This article also consider another cultural dimension that is identified by Hofstede — namely *masculinity and femininity* — and highlights the differences between the way in which French and western culture consider gender.

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1. Power distance

Hofstede's concept of power distance refers to the extent to which it accepted and understood that power is unequally spread. Where there is low power distance, there is generally more democracy, and individuals on a lower hierarchical position may contribute to a greater extent. The Hofstede model shows France ranking highly in terms of power distance and, according to Fischer-Sitzwohl et al,

> … nowadays, the hierarchy is usually to be respected. Even though employees can bypass their bosses, it is not often the case, and they often have to ask for their bosses' assent before taking a decision.

Western negotiators, particularly Australian negotiators, will tend to come from a background with a lower power distance. In practice, this may mean that French negotiators may interrupt negotiation proceedings more frequently in order to consult with their superiors. Although not always the case, it might also mean that more power may reside with one French negotiator than with the rest. It may be beneficial for western negotiators to ascertain at the onset of proceedings whether French negotiators have the authority to settle, and whether decisions will need to be ratified by superiors, and to what extent.

2. Uncertainty avoidance

According to Hofstede, Australians have an uncertainty avoidance of about 50 out of 100 and the United States has an even lower uncertainty avoidance index of 40 out of 100, while France has a high rate, at 80 out of a 100.[36] This means that the French have an uncertainty avoidance index of almost double that of the average western negotiator. Fischer-Sitzwohl et al, who note that 'The French don't like ambiguity and they try to reduce it by establishing formal rules in order to avoid ideas and behaviour they don't desire.'[37] In light of this information, it may be necessary for western negotiators to ensure that all statements and offers are clarified, and fully explained, so as to avoid creating a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity within French negotiators.

It is further explained that cultures that have a high uncertainty avoidance index tend to steer away from situations in which they feel uncomfortable, and situations that are new or novel.[38] This confirms the proposition discussed earlier, namely that as the French generally have a higher risk propensity in situations where they feel more comfortable, western negotiators may benefit from being aware of the importance of ensuring that negotiations occur in an atmosphere that feels secure and familiar to the parties.

3. Masculinity / femininity

Hofstede explains that

> Masculinity stands for a society in which social gender roles are clearly distinct: Men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success; women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life.

France is not considered to be a very masculine nation, and based one Hofstede's model, France has been rated with 40 out of 100 for masculinity.[39] This will tend to suggest that France is more feminine than it is masculine. Hofstede further notes that 'Femininity stands for a society in which social gender roles overlap: Both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life.'[40]

The rating for masculinity within the United States and Australia are substantially higher than France, both rating at a 60 out of 100 (as compared to 40 out of 100 in France).[41] The difference is not dramatic, but it is substantial and noteworthy. The difference is not as large as between, for example — Japan, which rated with 90 out of 100 for masculinity; or Norway, which rated with five out of 100 for masculinity.[42]

Western negotiators may not be aware of the relatively low rate of masculinity, and therefore high rate of femininity, of French culture. Indeed the feminine aspect of French culture maybe related to the French

concept of collectivism. Perhaps western negotiators may appeal to a French negotiator's sense of community and care for others, including the greater society. Perhaps too, western negotiators operating within French culture may consider underplaying masculine notions, such as competitiveness and individuality, to avoid creating an appearance that is hard and rigid.

Conclusion

It is clear that there are numerous differences between the French and western cultures that may ultimately create a range of stumbling blocks when cross-cultural negotiations are entered into between these two equally powerful, yet vastly differing world powers. It has also been revealed that western negotiators, with the best of intentions and excellent negotiation skills, may unwittingly cause great offence or confusion to French negotiators if they fail to take into consideration the cultural dimensions that set each nation of the world distinctly and uniquely apart from the rest. However a number of strategies have been outlined, whereby western negotiators may prepare for cross-cultural negotiations with French nationals with minor adjustments to ensure the comfort respect and continued alliance of their French opponents.

While these suggestions may be of immense benefit to western negotiators engaging in proceedings with French negotiators, it is always to be remembered that ultimately each person will bring a unique set of values and principles to the negotiation table — that the human element inherent in negotiations will always leave a sense of uncertainty and doubt that can only be countered with a true and honest spirit, and a genuine desire to understand and empathise with an individual from a culture that is intrinsically and vastly different to one's own. ●

Maria van der Walt is a JD student at Bond University. She can be contacted at <maria.vanderwalt@student.bond.edu.au>

Endnotes

1. Roy J Lewicki, Bruce Barry and David M Saunders, *Negotiation* (5th ed, 2006).
2. Above note 1.
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4. Roger Fisher and William B Ury, *Getting to Yes* (2nd ed, 1991).
5. Charles Cogan, *French Negotiating Behaviour* (2006) at 108.
6. Above note 1 at 419.
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9. Pascal Baudry, *French and Americans — The Other Shore* (2005) at 99.
10. Above note 1 at 415.
11. Above note 1 at 421.
12. Sally Adamson Taylor, *Culture Shock! France* (1990) at 27.
13. Above note 12 at 63.
14. Above note 1 at 431.
15. Above note 12 at 25.
16. Above note 1 at 421.
17. Above note 12 at 27.
18. Above note 12 at 64.
19. Above note 9 at 163.
20. Above note 1 at 422.
21. Above note 1 at 422.
22. Above note 12 at 31.
23. Above note 1 at 422.
24. Above note 1 at 422.
25. Above note 8.
26. G. Hofstede *Culture and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (1991).
27. Above note 1 at 415.
28. Above note 8.
29. Above note 1 at 423.
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31. Above note 1 at 423.
32. Above note 8.
33. Above note 1.
34. Above note 1 at 419.
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36. Geert Hofstede, *Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions Resources* (2009) <www.geert-hofstede.com/> at 14 June 2009.
37. Above note 8.
38. Above note 8 at 16.
39. Above note 16.
40. Hostede, *Culture's Consequences* (2nd ed. 2001) at 297.
41. Above note 16.
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