

NO SUCH THING AS SMALL TALK

7 KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING GERMAN BUSINESS CULTURE



MELISSA LAMSON

FOREWORD BY ASTRID FROHLOFF,
PROMINENT NEWS ANCHOR & TV JOURNALIST IN GERMANY



No Such Thing as Small Talk

7 Keys to Understanding German
Business Culture

Book Excerpt

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Foreword by Astrid Frohloff



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Foreword

Foreword By Astrid Frohloff

Prominent News Anchor & TV Journalist in Germany

Many years ago, my professor in Germany told me that, as a journalist, one of the most important sentences I needed to remember is, "I am committed to the truth." This sentence, so simple at the time, became my mantra throughout my career. With each research, writing, or film project, I would say to myself, "Remember your commitment, don't let your prejudice lead you, stay away from clichés, and find the truth in every story." Nevertheless, this is often more difficult than one imagines.

Thus, in the course of my twenty-year career in the media business as a television reporter and host, I have come to believe that the best method to reaching the truth is to become acquainted with the people from whom the story comes directly and to learn from their experiences.

I spent five years as a television correspondent in the Near East. I quickly came to understand that spending time listening to the people and their different perspectives was key to making sense of the complicated political and business relations there. In the course of long discussions, I could empathize with their situation and develop a sense of what it was like to live and work in their cultural context.

I had a similar experience in the United States, where, for a time, I studied and practiced journalism. Not only did I learn the American way of life, but I came to understand the complexity of the culture there as well. To my surprise, although we seem quite similar on the surface, Americans think, feel, and behave completely differently from the way we do in Germany.

I was therefore extremely enthusiastic when I met Melissa nine years ago. As CEO of Lamson Consulting, Melissa had made a career of helping people do exactly that—understand each other! She advised highly reputable German enterprises and business leaders, helping them to bridge the communication gap. She is a brilliant observer and analyst, and I admired how clear and straightforward she was in her interpretation of German society.

Out of her life and work experiences, Melissa has written this marvelous book, *No Such Thing as Small Talk: 7 Keys to Understanding German Business Culture*. Melissa carries us along on a descriptive and instructive journey. She explains the Germans and their culture in its many facets, finely observed and highly detailed, yet with a quirky sense of humor that makes the book an absolute delight to read. For Americans and others, it is a masterful didactic piece combined with practical business advice. For Germans, it's a charming look in the mirror! Imagine the impact on the world, if every business and political leader today made it a point to understand how diverse cultures communicate?

As a news anchor, I have held one-to-one interviews with many major political figures, including our current Chancellor, Angela Merkel, members of European Parliament, and prominent business leaders from multinational companies, i.e., Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, and Diane Bryant, the CIO of Intel. Currently, I host an investigative news TV magazine on ARD, the channel most well-known on German television for historically ripping the lid off of major political and economic scandals. I see firsthand how culture influences

the way today's leaders communicate, make decisions, and create policy. It is imperative that we develop a deeper understanding for this diversity.

What I admire about *No Such Thing as Small Talk: 7 Keys to Understanding German Business Culture* is that it attempts to celebrate our differences, while simultaneously eradicating stereotypes. It is funny, yet poignant in terms of its explanation for why things are the way they are. In our ever-growing interconnected world, we need more books like this one to assist us successfully with the challenge of living and doing business with our fellow human beings.

I invite you to take my life and work mantra as your own; read, question, and listen to the stories people tell you, make the effort to understand, and with that, we will all be committed to the truth.

2 Key #1: Seriousness Is a Virtue

One thing other cultures notice about people from Germany is that Germans come across as very serious. When I ask my workshop participants to draw their impressions of Germany, they often draw a face icon with a straight line for a mouth. It is true that smiling is used more minimally than in some other cultures. Sometimes you might see a furrowed brow, and the German person seems to be unhappy or annoyed. Most likely they are simply deep in thought. It is common for people from Germany to think a lot (look where many of the great philosophers came from!), so this analysis going on inside their heads may give the impression on the outside as a grumpy face, but in fact it's not the case at all. They're just deep in thought.

Germans do take life and work seriously, but part of their serious image has to do with body language. People from Germany don't usually smile unless they are experiencing

something they really like. A funny joke, a game they can be competitive in, or hanging out with a good friend are things that may all produce smiles. Smiling is reserved for specific events. Otherwise, especially in business, Germans use a neutral expression, neither frowning nor smiling. It's kind of like what one might call a "poker face."

While I was living in Berlin, the editor of the *Financial Times* newspaper (a Brit, obviously new to Germany), sent a letter to Chancellor Schroeder saying he was worried the people of Germany were depressed and he thought he should do something about it. The Chancellor never responded, but I'm sure he wondered what the heck the FT editor was talking about!

Just because by other cultural standards the people from Germany don't look happy, doesn't mean they're not happy. Germany still has one of the richest economies in the world. For the most part everyone has a home, food, and transportation; people have it pretty good there by many standards. (In fact, the local "homeless" woman in my neighborhood joined my gym one day.) Therefore, it's

not that people are entirely unhappy; it's just that they are more serious-looking in their facial expressions than other cultures.

The other thing I should tell you is that eye contact can be quite strong in Germany. Sometimes a person is not even looking at you, but instead he or she is "spacing out," thinking about something and you just happen to be in the direction of their gaze. German children are taught that looking in the eyes is a sign of respect, trust, and self-confidence. Most of the time when someone's talking or you meet someone for the first time, eye contact is a critical element of communication etiquette. To some cultures, it feels a bit like staring.

For example, a team from Singapore was brought over to work on a project for a company in Munich. Their backgrounds were Indian and Chinese, and most of them hadn't lived outside of Singapore nor had they been to Germany before. My job was to acclimate them to German culture and help them with any questions they might have about working or living in Germany.

On the first day, I came into the meeting room and welcomed them to Germany. I asked, "So tell me how it's going so far?" (They had been there a total of five days.)

"It's going ok..." one person answered, "But just a little question though, are the Germans racist?"

Putting my diplomatic hat on, I said, "What makes you think to ask that?"

"Well," others started to chime in, "they STARE at us and don't look too happy."

"Oh!" I said, "They stare at everybody, even each other! Don't worry, it could be curiosity or interest or just spacing out, but most likely it's not racism." And then I went on to explain the different values placed on eye contact across cultures and why people from Germany look like they're staring or have such serious facial expressions.

Because eye contact can be so intense, it may also feel intimate to people from other cultures, meaning you might get the feeling someone is romantically interested in you when they're not. For example, one time my fiancé and I were invited to a party in California thrown by some

German friends. As we mingled with the guests, both American and German, a guy I had never met before and I were introduced to each other by the host. This guy had just relocated to California from Germany. I asked, "What do you do?" and he launched into an explanation while making unwavering eye contact. He told me in great detail about his job, career, plans for the future. (Explanation for why he needed to go into such detail will come later in the book.) It took about twenty minutes. Because I'm used to this communication style, I know that to be polite and show that I'm listening, I should look directly back into his eyes, blink infrequently, and keep a straight face (no fidgeting and no interrupting). After our chat, my fiancé and I continued to mingle and enjoy the rest of the party.

On the way home, my fiancé was annoyed, "Why did you corner yourself off talking to that guy so long? And was he staring at you?" he asked.

"I just met the guy tonight and he was telling me about his job." I said. "Right," my fiancé exclaimed, accompanied by an eye-roll. "People don't need to talk that long and intimately about their job with a stranger at a party."

Of course, I started to explain the differences in eye contact across cultures, and how by German standards he was just being polite and thorough in answering my question, but I realized by the speed with which my fiancé was driving the car, that I should quickly shut my mouth and pick a better time to share my anthropological insights with him.

The funny thing is, a few weeks later, we were at another party with a few German couples. One of the wives went up to him and wanted to discuss good sightseeing possibilities in California. She started to explain her interests and hobbies. Later, my fiancé said, "Ok, I see what you mean, they just want to exchange information, but it feels a little too close by American standards." Needless to say, people from Germany do make stronger eye contact than many other cultures, and it's completely normal (and without flirtatious intent) in that context.

Formality in the workplace, in addition to seriousness, is also important, especially around those colleagues one doesn't know as well. Formal greetings, hellos, and goodbyes, are common. Regularly shaking hands with your colleagues first thing in the morning or saying goodbye at the end of the day, although a dying custom, is

still done at many public and private institutions. Last names are almost always used in the workplace. Joking around is either done at lunch, in a coffee break or at the end of the day. After work is over, people will relax a bit and feel comfortable being more informal.

You may have noticed I'm using the word "colleague." This is what people from Germany call co-workers, peers, and even managers. Anyone they work with, no matter what the hierarchy, for the most part, is referred to as a "colleague." I have a client, a German company, for whom I helped set up a U.S. subsidiary. The company hired an American CEO. On one of his first days on the job, he wrote to the entire staff introducing himself. He started the email with "Hi Team," and the German staff were confused and somewhat hurt by the phrase. They felt it was so informal that it was impolite. They were used to getting group emails addressed to "Hi Colleagues," which sounded more personal to their ears.

Formality while making a presentation, sharing data, holding a meeting, and discussing a project is highly regarded. Being too informal or joking around may lose the respect of a German business partner. In some cultures,

like the U.S., we use informality as a way of breaking the ice or making our business partner feel more comfortable. Remember Michael Keaton in the movie *Gung Ho* when he made that disastrous presentation to the Japanese company? In the film, Michael Keaton is an employee at an automotive plant that is suffering financially and a team of Japanese business people are considering taking it over. He travels all the way to Japan to meet with management and to convince them once and for all to buy the plant. Michael Keaton gets in the room, starts his presentation with a few jokes, his hands are in his front pants pockets and he is extremely informal. At some point in the beginning of his presentation, he shows a slide with a pretty woman and makes a joke by trying to act like he didn't realize it was in there. The funny part about the scene is that with all of his antics, the Japanese managers are sitting there watching him with completely straight, serious faces and don't respond to his jokes in the least.

Joking can come at a later point in Germany, but if you're not serious—at least upfront—you could lose credibility, trust and worst of all, come off as a buffoon.

The learning points for this key are

- Use formal etiquette when meeting your German counterparts—shake hands, use last names if they do.
- Maintain a more serious demeanor and formal posture.
- Dress a bit more formally. It never hurts to wear a business suit in Germany.
- Do not joke around or get too relaxed until the business is coming to a close. (At the end of your trip, or at least at the end of the workday.)
- Remember that eye contact can be stronger than in other cultures and that they expect you to maintain eye contact to show that you're listening and are honest.
- Once you've proven yourself to be serious about the content or project, you'll be able to relax a little bit more next time.

Appendix

E Useful Websites about German Society

About Germany

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germany>

<http://bit.ly/dkcoum>¹

German Beer

<http://www.germanbeerinstitute.com/>

German Food

<http://www.kitchenproject.com/german/>

Traveling to Germany

<http://bit.ly/9y6XpL>²

1. www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0107568.html
#axzz0zyXWG

2. www.germanculture.com.ua/library/links/travel.htm

Soccer Rules

<http://bit.ly/8Zi73H>³

Shopping in Germany (Christmas Markets)

<http://www.germany-christmas-market.org.uk/>

Driving in Germany

<http://www.howtogermany.com/pages/driving.html>

3. www.soccerhelp.com/Soccer_Rules_Rules_Of_Soccer.shtml

A u t h o r

About the Author



Back in the U.S. after ten years based in Europe, Melissa Lamson is a pioneer in the field of cross-cultural communication and global business development. She has run projects in more than thirty countries, working with Fortune Global 500 companies, governments, nonprofits, SMEs, foreign investors, and C-level executives across all industries.

In 2008, Melissa was nominated as one of 25 top female entrepreneurs in Europe and hers was among the first female-owned businesses to receive an award from the German Ministry of Cultural Affairs. Melissa is regularly invited to speak on the topic of global business development and she guest lectures in executive MBA programs in Europe and the United States.

To find out how your company can benefit from Melissa's expertise, visit: www.lamsonconsulting.com

Getting “No Such Thing as Small Talk”
(<http://happyabout.com/nosuchthingsmalltalk.php>)

“No Such Thing as Small Talk” can be purchased as an eBook for \$14.95 or tradebook for \$19.95 at <http://happyabout.com/nosuchthingsmalltalk.php> or at other online and physical book stores.

Please contact us for quantity discounts sales@happyabout.info or to be informed about upcoming titles bookupdate@happyabout.info or phone (408-257-3000).

"As a German executive working for an American company, we confront cultural challenges on a daily basis. Thank goodness this book exists! I can finally help my counterparts understand the way we work in Germany."

Heidi Hollerauer, Technical Director, Disney, Germany

"In all my years of working globally, a practical, hands-on guide for how it works in another culture would have helped tremendously. Melissa hit the mark with this book about German culture. She not only informs but entertains her readers, too. I highly recommend it."

Dirk Miller, Vice President Corporate Communications, Siemens

"As a Chinese-American business leader at one of the largest global IT companies, I can truly attest to Melissa's insight and knowledge about the German mindset and communication styles. I've read numerous books about cross-cultural communication and this is a must-read for anyone working in a global business environment."

Alice Leong, Global Vice President of Diversity, SAP

Melissa Lamson is a pioneer in the field of cross-cultural communication and global business development. She has run projects in more than thirty countries, working with Fortune Global 500 companies, governments, nonprofits, SMEs, foreign investors, and C-level executives across all industries. In 2008, Melissa was nominated as one of 25 top female entrepreneurs in Europe and she was among the first female-owned businesses to receive an award from the German Ministry of Cultural Affairs.



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