

# Teaming with Trouble

## Differences that Make a Difference in German-American Teams

*This article provides a cursory overview of the issues relevant to the functioning of German-American bicultural teams. It is not meant to be an exhaustive description of German-American differences, but a jumping off point for those whose work involves teams composed of Germans and Americans.*

When a German hears the word “team” does he or she envision the same thing that an American does? Is it possible that American motivational techniques could backfire with Germans? How can Germans and Americans misunderstand each other even when they are communicating in the same language?

Working with binational teams of Germans and Americans we have discovered some answers to these questions.

German companies have been involved in global business ventures since the advent of the industrial age. The U.S. was one of the first destinations with Bayer already having a branch in Albany, New York in 1865. Currently the amount of German investment

in the U.S. is remarkable – nearly 60% of the \$300 billion in German foreign investment are in the United States, compared to 19 percent in Great Britain, 9 percent in Italy, and about 5 percent in France. Germany, being the largest economy in Europe is, of course, a prime target for the interests of U.S. corporations.

As corporations come together, their people come together as well. Increased affordability and ease of communication with frequent air connections, reasonable telephone rates and the convenience of e-mail are also fostering an increase in the creation of teams that find themselves straddling Germany and the U.S.

### Teams and Differences

#### Types of Teams

International teams can be divided into three types – token groups, bicultural groups and multicultural groups. Token groups are those in which the majority of the group is of a particular culture, with a single individual from a second culture – an otherwise entirely French group with a single German team member, for instance. Bicultural groups are those in which two nationalities are represented on the team in roughly equal numbers. In multicultural groups,

members represent three or more nationalities. The types of groups have overlap in the nature of their dynamics as well as having characteristics particular to their own type.

Bicultural Teams. We will concern ourselves here exclusively with the German-American bicultural group. That being said, it is important to remember that under the rubric of “German” or “American” we often encounter members of the team who may bring with them another heritage culture that can influence the dynamics. Given the demographic realities of the U.S. and Germany, this is more frequently the case with the American members of the team. Nevertheless, while not wishing to stereotype, we will deal with our comments regarding the two nationalities within these groups as though they were internally homogeneous.

Bicultural teams tend to succeed or fail with excess – they are either highly ineffective or highly effective. Diversity in and of itself is not a recipe for excellence; well-managed diversity is.

Bicultural teams tend to be better at certain things and not so proficient at others. Initial group formation, decision-

making and implementation are a greater challenge to bicultural teams than to monocultural teams, whereas bicultural teams can truly excel at creating ideas.

them” attitude based on nationality. A further embroidering of this dynamic is the identification of those who express openness towards the “others” as being turncoats.

**Differing Corporate Organizational Models**

Both German and American corporations tend towards flat hierarchical structures relative to many other cultures.



Bicultural teams go through similar phases in their path to productivity as do other teams. The most commonly cited sequence is Bruce Tuckman’s “Forming-Storming-Norming-Performing”. Moving through the phases for bicultural teams can be complicated by a variety of factors including mistrust, miscommunication and a high level of stress. How well and how quickly the group comes to terms with these issues depends on the level of intercultural sensitivity of the various individual members of the group towards their international counterparts.

A dynamic particular to bicultural groups is the possible entrenchment in an “us vs.

**Stumbling Blocks Encountered by German-American Teams**

There are many differences that can affect team function, including leadership, the manner of goal definition and approaches to strategy. We are going to discuss those most directly related to team function:

- corporate organizational models
- concept and function of teams
- motivation strategies
- communication style
- problem solving and decision-making processes
- relationship to time
- language

However, the German cultural tendency to value the predictability and reproducibility afforded by formality, rules, documentation and standardized procedures, versus the American cultural tendency to value flexibility and speed, results in German corporations taking on vertical structures that persist whereas U.S. corporations often work with relatively fluid matrix organization.

**Concept and Function of Teams**

The German concept of a team is a group of individuals each with a specific expertise under a strong leader with a specific objective and a recognized place in the overall organiza-

tion. Ad hoc groups across hierarchical lines are unlikely to evoke whole-hearted commitment. Teams must be properly constituted, have a place in the timetable and the organization chart and not add to the team members' workload. The German team comes together initially to define objectives and

building on one another's thoughts ("yes, and" (an expression when translated literally into German results in the demotivating, "ja, und")). Thus, American teams are both internally competitive and cooperative. Teams are formed ad hoc for a short period of time to accomplish a specific

Americans may view the methodical clarification and definition process as unwillingness to get to "work". This misinterpretation is often voiced with frustration by the American members of bicultural teams who say, "what we need as a team is to just DO IT!".



the task boundaries for the individual team members. Then the expectation is that the individual team members work independently on their specific tasks to the very best of their ability, coming together again only to assemble the interlocking pieces.

The American idea of a team involves frequent meetings, brainstorming, ("just say the first idea that comes to mind, we'll evaluate later"), much overlap of activity ("you do your version, I'll do mine, then we'll compare and combine the best elements of the two"),

goal and then disbanded. Since Americans commit on an as-needed basis, individuals can work on a number of teams at once and feel little need to establish a long-term relationship with their team members.

Thus, the German members of a bicultural team often need a clearer definition of the roles and activities of the team than the Americans in a bicultural team. The German members of a team may misinterpret their American counterparts as being ignorant of or unwilling to work according to best practice. For their part, the

**Motivation Strategies –  
"Terrific job" vs. "Not bad"**

German employees, being the product of a system of standardized, rigorous and selective education and technical training recognized throughout the world for its excellence, are assumed to perform as disciplined and hard-working experts doing work in classical ways and to known standards. They are expected to work independent of external praise. Movement within the organization is relatively infrequent, either laterally or vertically.

In the U.S. work relationships are continuously being redefined. In this ever-changing environment the manager expects a good performance but, in turn, the employee expects praise (“atta-boy’s/girl’s”), recognition (“employee-of-the-month”, an assigned parking spot, a token gift), and new assignments (often based on the ability to manage people, not expertise in the job content), a more impressive job title, or a raise or bonus. Myriad management training programs emphasize the importance of the attitudinal and motivational components of management, citing the importance of compliments, praise and reward as productivity strategies.

Germans on a German-American bicultural team may view the verbal praise expressed by their U.S. counterparts as excessive, phony or suspect (“werde ich hinausgelobt?” (“Are they trying to get rid of me?”) “Nehmen die mich auf den Arm?” (“Are they making a fool of me?”). Even if German team members find such praise pleasant, it may be difficult for them to reciprocate, leaving the American team member with the false impression of a lack of goodwill. One of the criterion for a good work environment for Americans includes being recognized and liked by co-workers. When expressions of personal approval are not forthcoming from their German counterparts, American team members have said, “I can’t

believe I’ve done a good job. I feel empty inside.”

Because one of the motivational strategies commonly used by U.S. managers is reassignment to a new task or department, the tenure of U.S. team members in a particular area of responsibility is often shorter than that of their German counterparts. This can be extremely frustrating to German team members who are accustomed to working relationships of longer duration. They can feel they have wasted their time in committing to the particular relationship and may experience a sense of betrayal or evaluate the decision-maker as incompetent for having erroneously assigned the individual only to reassign them so soon.

**Communication Style – “Like me” vs. “Respect me”**

The basic purpose of communication differs for Germans and Americans. At the risk of oversimplifying, it might be said that Germans communicate to demonstrate what they know and to garner respect while Americans communicate to demonstrate their willingness to get along and desire to be liked. Respect develops slowly while one can “like” someone within minutes. Thus Germans tend to take longer to establish trusting relationships

than do Americans. In one study when asked “Do you trust people?”, 19 percent of Germans said, “yes” while 55 percent of Americans answered in the affirmative. This leads Americans to display remarkable friendliness and spontaneity vis-à-vis strangers in contrast with Germans who tend to be relatively reserved.

This difference in the way trust is established can cause problems in working relationships. Americans who are assigned to work with a German counterpart and telephone or e-mail requesting information without any preliminary formal authorization (trust by proxy) or face-to-face meeting, are often surprised when their German team member reacts with, “who told you to contact me?”, “who exactly are you?”, “what is this going to be used for?”, “no one informed me of this” or no response at all. The German team member may feel caught off guard because he or she does not know how to respond to the request or genuinely wants to ensure that information is not dispensed indiscriminately. The American can feel rebuffed and insulted and the previous friendliness replaced with a hard-as-nails negotiation stance or complete withdrawal. The German misperceptions in such circumstances can be those of superficiality or sneakiness on the American’s part.

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Germans and Americans also exhibit markedly different discourse styles. Americans communicate in brief bursts of information. Particularly in business, the ideals are the sound byte and the executive summary with its one page of bulleted information condensing only the most salient points. German academic training encourages a pattern of cognition and expression based on thorough explanation of each of the sub-components of an idea and a subsequent integration into an

**While Germans emphasize past history and present reality, Americans work with their gaze fixed on the future.**

These communication style differences mean that German and American meetings take on different forms. An American meeting generally begins with a round of small talk and then moves on to the presentation of a draft idea infused with humor that “breaks the tension”. A German meeting is likelier to move more quickly to the business at hand which is the presentation of a well-formulated concept.

Perhaps the greatest communication challenge to German-

leave Americans insulted in interactions with Germans, while Germans can feel that issues are being skirted and their counterparts are not being entirely honest with them.

**Differing Problem Solving and Decision-Making Processes – “Trial and Error” vs. “Paralysis by Analysis”**

Germans are often schooled in a decision analysis methodology that encourages them to generate all possible solutions, weigh the strengths and weaknesses of each one based on historical research, present the reasons why all but one is unacceptable and why that



elegant whole. Germans can perceive American communication as lacking substance, while the Americans can find Germans longwinded and obsessively detail-oriented.

American teams is the establishment a common “Streitkultur”. Americans tend to be less direct than Germans and often hesitate in bringing up negative issues. This can

remaining one is the one “True Way”. Americans, on the other hand, are often quite comfortable picking a decision that appears adequate and honing the solution through trial and

error. You will often hear Americans say, "Sounds good! Let's run it up the flagpole and see who salutes!" This seemingly casual approach can appear lackadaisical to Germans. Americans often feel that the longer process favored by German team members will result in the loss of business opportunities.

**Differing Relationship to Time**

For Germans time is a crucial organizational tool. The emphasis is to establish a pace and schedule that will result in the highest quality outcome. For Americans, time is money and speed often an end in itself. It is very difficult for Americans to understand that Germans are willing to sacrifice speed in a planned schedule or to slip delivery dates in the name of quality.

Another aspect of time that can cause German and American team members frustration is the difference in focus on the time continuum. While Germans emphasize past history and present reality, Americans work with their gaze fixed on the future. Thus the citing of historical data and current conditions form the core of a concept for Germans, whereas an inspiring vision for tomorrow guides American thinking.

**Language Barrier**

While a language barrier is an issue for many bicultural teams, the particular dynamics associated with German-

American teams are:

- German apprehension to speak even though their English may be excellent
- German reticence in admitting the need for language support, i.e. the use of dictionaries and glossaries, off-line checking for meaning among German colleagues, etc.
- Because Germans often speak grammatically correct English with a sophisticated command of technical vocabulary specific to their area of expertise, Americans can misperceive their ability to understand spoken colloquial English. It is helpful if the message is conveyed to the Americans on the team that when English is used as a working language it is not the language of a native speaker of American English but rather the text book grammar and dictionary vocabulary English often referred to as English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Thus on a well-functioning German-American team everyone is speaking a second language – EFL.
- Americans, being to a great degree monolingual, are often unaware of how mentally, emotionally and physically taxing working in a foreign language can be and thus unskilled at supporting their German team mates with regard to language issues.

**What's a Manager to Do?**

At the outset both German and American managers often imagine that the similarities in their cultures of origin mean that there will be little or no "culture clash" in bringing these nationalities together in teams. This assumption can be problematic for managing such teams.

The most productive management approach includes learning about the kinds of differences outlined above, crafting commonly held team objectives and consciously creating a team culture that makes sense for everyone.

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