Business Etiquette in Poland, Germany, France and China: an Intercultural Approach

JOANNA ZATOR-PELJAN, PH.D.
Poznan University College of Business
POLAND

Abstract: The globalized business world offers a variety of business cooperation possibilities: plenty of international contracts between particular concerns are being taken into consideration and then negotiated. The decisive aspects of successful intercultural negotiations are not only certain contract conditions – they can be perceived as those of important matters. This paper offers a theoretical investigation into the equally essential items - business etiquette that can be contemplated as very similar, or completely different, while taking into consideration different cultural areas.

Key-Words: business etiquette, intercultural communication, business and culture, intercultural business approach

1. INTRODUCTION

The author of this article analyses an essential aspect of successful collaboration between international companies that concerns business etiquette of chosen nations. The particular manners characteristic for each cultural area are strongly connected with the current situation of international enterprises trying to expand their activities abroad: “Contemporary businesses have once been organized and are continually reorganized in order to face growing internationalization of business contacts and exchanges” (Magala, 2010:11). More and more Polish companies are also attempting to expand their commercial activity abroad. On the other hand there can be observed a great number of e.g. German or French brands within the scope of the Polish home market. According to the research conducted in May 2011 by the Polish Ministry of Economy in association with Ageron Poland, Germany (26,1%) and France (7,0%) are held as Polish prime export partners. As reported in the above-mentioned study, Polish import partners view such nations as Germany (22.3%) and China (9.3%) as crucial. Therefore, the business etiquette description of the aforementioned countries is going to be treated as the main focus of this investigation.

Worth mentioning is the fact that international cooperation is responsible for creating the so called intercultures that are defined as an interaction between members of a certain world, specifically, as the members of ‘World B’ (Bolten, 2007:22). The need for communication among different countries has created a phenomenon that is called intercultural communication and focuses on international relations analysis (Lüsebrink, 2005:7; Thomas 2007, 56). At this point the aspect of cultural diversity should also be inspected – conforming to G. Hofstede/G.J. and Hofstede/Minkov (2010) each cultural area has its own “mental programming” that consists of particular
patterns of behavior and emotional attitudes which are being “programmed” by societies in early childhood - a period of time which is responsible for collecting a database of future reactions within the scope of a culture that one belongs to (G. Hofstede/G.J. Hofstede/Minkov, 2010: 4). Goodenough (1964) claims that “culture cannot be perceived as a kind of material phenomena because it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions.” (Goodenough 1964: 36) The author regards culture rather as an organization of the above-quoted aspects which are thoughts and feelings of a person, interpersonal relations or the way of interpreting reality by certain people: “A society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves.” (ibid.) On the other hand Heringer (2004) and Markowsky/Thomas (1995) concentrate on another critical aspect - culture as a means of orientation within a foreign reality. Consequently, the prime similarities and differences concerning business etiquette are vital when it comes to orientation in the unknown business reality of particular countries.

2. BUSINESS ETIQUETTE – DEFINITION

Academic literature illustrates a variety of business etiquette definitions. Martin and Chaney (2012) indicate the aim of etiquette existence in the following way: “successful interactions with people of other countries involve knowledge of rules of global etiquette to avoid inadvertently offending them during intercultural encounters (Martin/Chaney, 2012: ix). As a rough estimation, business etiquette is treated as a skill of “knowing what to do and when” (Sabath, 1993:7). A more specified explanation is presented by Moore (1998): “Business etiquette is a set of rules that allow us to communicate and interact in a civilized manner. These arbitrary rules involve the rites and mores, forms and manners that are required in a society or profession. Successful business people usually conform to this expected behavioral code. The rules are fairly simple to keep with minimal effort required, yet the benefits may be considerable.” (Moore, 1998:1) Gibson-Odgers (2008) regards business etiquette as a kind of specific language spoken in the business environment: “The rules of etiquette can be compared to a common language that all successful professionals must learn to speak (...). Etiquette skills can help establish productive relationships with colleagues and clients. Successful relationships begin when you exhibit courtesy, respect and concern for the comfort of others. Better relationships mean better business.” (Gibson-Odgers, 2008:147) Similar definitions can be also found in the investigation of R. Cook/G. Cook/Yale (2005), Post (1922/2007), Parsons (2008), Guffey/Loewy (2010) and Waldeck/Kearney/Plax (2012). As was already noted, a considerable part of this paper will be devoted to business etiquette analysis in the following countries: Poland, Germany, France and China.

2.1: Business Etiquette in Poland

Polish business etiquette manifests itself in several ways. First of all, Polish business courtesy “demands that foreign business people make contact with the highest levels of Polish companies, preferably with the person actually in charge. It is considered as an insult to do otherwise.” (Deck-Partyka, 2006:326) Moreover, the first impression plays an important role. For this reason, much attention should be paid to wearing elegant and decent clothing: “Conservative dress and conduct prevail, as Poles are conservative in dress and demeanor and that translates into a business climate where humility and respect are favored over bravado and arrogance.” (Deck-Partyka, 2006:328) The above-presented opinion is confirmed by Sabath (2004) and described in a more specific way: “Men should wear business suits with pressed white shirts and ties. (...) It is typical for Poles to wear lighter-colored suits during the day and darker ones during the evening. Women should also dress in a professional manner by wearing tailored suits or dresses that command a business presence, with heels.” (Sabath, 2004:167) Additionally, a very positive good impression may be destroyed by calling meeting participants by their first names: “Don’t address your Polish business associate by first name unless you’re invited to do so.” (Deck-Partyka, 2006:328)

Another significant issue concerns the age of potential meeting participants – it is common that Polish managers may be much younger than e.g. the German ones: “The people you may be doing business with in Poland could be young, educated managers, fluent in English and with a very familiar business style. On the other hand, you may well meet with senior managers whose experience comes from running elephantine socialist state corporations.” (Allen, 2010:151)

Business cards should be exchanged with each person taking part in a certain meeting. At this point a useful piece of advice for foreigners is given by Sabath (2005): “You will make a lasting impression on your Polish contacts by having the reverse side of your business card translated into Polish. The Poles also place values on titles, so make a point of having
the name of your position enlarged on the Polish side of your business card. If you have earned any academic degrees, these should also be printed on your card.” (Sabath, 2005:164)

Poles tend to meet in the company’s office or in a restaurant to discuss a prospective international cooperation (ibid, 163). Although there is a so called mixed attitude towards punctuality in Poland, as a foreign guest one should always arrive on time: “Many Poles are sticklers about it and place great importance on punctuality, whereas, others are more lax in their attitudes about time.” (ibid.) As reported by Sabath (2004), a well-prepared Power Point presentation plays a very significant role during a meeting: “When delivering a presentation to your Polish contacts, be sure it is clear, concise, and has been translated into Polish on paper. This will allow them to follow along with you as you deliver your presentation, using graphs and charts. It will also allow them to have information to pass to the final decision-maker, who may not be present.” (ibid.)

Foreign business people are sometimes invited to socialize at a party. Poles are “likely to ask questions that you may consider personal and would never think of asking (for example, how old you are, your income, if you’re married, or the number of children you have). Be prepared for such questions so you’ll know how to handle them when they come up.” (ibid., 164)

Last but not least, good contacts and personal acceptance are contemplated as crucial while negotiating in Poland: “The personal connection is an important part of business relations in Poland.” (Deck-Partyka 2006:326) As stated by Deck-Partyka (2006), Polish people “insist on trust and confidence in their prospective partners before they sign any agreement. The Polish spirit is composed of self-reliance and individualism. Most Poles are blunt, do not hesitate to say what they think and enter the decision-making process fearless.” (ibid.) Other authors such as e.g. Tertorov/ Reuvid (2005) or Kissel (2008) define a similar position when it comes to the Polish business etiquette.

2.2: Business Etiquette in Germany

While comparing business etiquette in the two neighbouring countries it occurs that the German rules of making a proper first impression are very similar to the above-presented Polish ones. When it comes to the German dress code, the following aspects are regarded as essential: “In Germany you wear the following colours in business: grey, navy and brown. Black is for official occasions but not for business meetings. A lady may go for more colourful clothing. The rule is: the more senior your position, the more conservative your style.” (Noelle/Strohschein, 2011:30) According to Sabath’s (2005) viewpoint, Germans wear much more conservative business clothing than other Europeans do: “Unlike many other Europeans, Germans dress in a very conservative manner. Attire during the workday is business professional. Men should wear a complete suit, even in the summer, with a modest tie and starched white shirt (…). Women should choose modestly cut suits that mean business. Pants are not the custom for women in Germany.” (Sabath 2005:90)

Each business meeting begins with associates’ and guests’ introduction: “Protocol requires that the highest ranking visitor introduces himself, or is introduced, to the senior manager present, and then the senior manager is introduced to the visiting team – again by seniority – with brief descriptions of their area of responsibility. Then it’s the German host’s turn to do the introductions. Smiles aren’t required. The senior German manager will be seated in the center, with the next senior executive on his right.” (Flamini 1997:56) Business cards are supposed to be exchanged at the beginning of a meeting (ibid.). A significant issue concerning physical distance during business meetings in Germany should also be mentioned: “Germans tend to put more physical space between each other than do Asians, Americans or other Europeans when holding a conversation. Though you may feel uncomfortably far away, don’t move your chair in closer. Rearranging the furniture in a German office is considered highly insulting. While an Italian businessman might put his hand on a counterpart’s arm or elbow while talking, a German executive would leap away from such a gesture.” (ibid., 58) Business and private conversations are in Germany – unlike in Poland – kept separate: “German executives tend to separate their private and professional lives and they’re not likely to volunteer information about their families. (…) they have a reputation for not cross-examining people they’ve just met about such personal details.” (ibid.)

German business meetings are commonly well-organized and accurately planned. Being aware of a certain meeting order may be helpful to foreign associates visiting Germany: “When the follow-up meeting takes place (…), the senior German executive will open the proceedings, and then either explain the company’s negotiating position himself or introduce an expert in the field under discussion.” (ibid., 60) German business presentations are consistently supported by various empirical data: “The German arguments will be empirically based, backed by figures and detailed information. And they’ll expect their response
to be studied before receiving an answer” (ibid.). As reported by Flamini (1997), German negotiating style can be viewed as “a long and pain staking process” (ibid., 61). While negotiating contract conditions, Germans will present a unified front (ibid.). Foreign business people should be also aware of the fact that they are known as “hard bargainers” (ibid.). Comparable standpoints to the above-mentioned ones concerning German business etiquette are also stated by Schmidt (1999), Reuvid (2002) and Schroll-Machl (2003).

2.3: Business Etiquette in France

Understanding the French work attitude plays a significant role while comprehending the French business etiquette: “A French person’s work ethic is different from the one espoused by most Americans, Britons, Germans or Hong Kong Chinese, who tend to work nonstop and see money as an end in itself. An American may strive to be the first to produce a widget or to be the top salesman for his company in a given year. A Frenchman would find such ambitions crass.” (Joseph 1997:35)

France is considered as the world centre of fashion – the majority of top fashion designers come from this cultural area and influence the rest of the world with their sense of beauty (Sabath 2005:79). The French tend to wear top-quality designer clothing not only while doing business, but also in the routine of their everyday life – the tendency of judging by appearance is common in France: “When doing business with the French, you should be sure to dress the part. The French will interpret the image you present as an indication of the level of status you’ve attained and the measure of your business success. Clothes and accessories of high quality will therefore count for a lot.” (ibid.) As reported by Sabath (2005), the existence of particular business dress code for men and for women should be taken into consideration when concentrating on the French business etiquette: “Men should choose dark suits, white or striped oxfords, and complementary ties. Women should select modestly cut suits or dresses and elegant accessories” (ibid.). In contradiction to German female business style, French women focus on emphasizing their femininity: “It is important to note that unlike many countries, women still dress in a feminine manner and want to be seen as a feminine. Soft colors, delicate jewelry, updated hairstyles, and makeup creating an overall chic look are all essential.” (ibid.)

Business cards should be exchanged in France “with new business acquaintances following your initial handshake and greeting. Be sure to present your card to the most senior person first as a gesture of respect.” (ibid., 80)

French business meeting can be interpreted as disordered and never-ending: “While little brainstorming takes place during meetings, there are, instead, time-consuming arguments about issues that may not be central to the issue at hand – such as the rationale behind choosing system A over system B. The debate usually focuses on a priori logical arguments, instead of on spontaneous or creative solutions.” (Joseph, 1997:36) According to Joseph (1997) the French negotiation style is considered as time-consuming and very emotional: “Negotiation is treated like a verbal duel (…), and they prefer that proposals build up slowly, so that each of its building blocks can be analyzed and digested. Be prepared for long, drawn-out debates (…). Often the negotiations are like a roller coaster ride of emotions. Often, they’re embellished with historical or literary allusions. And the French would often rather argue the pros and cons of an issue face to face than read a prepared summary that stated the same points. Indeed, foreigners may find it wearing, even never-ending.” (ibid, 56)

It is advisable to omit issues concerning private life while meeting on a business level in France: “When conversing with the French, stay away from any topic that is deemed personal, especially in regards to their private lives or your own.” (Sabath, 2005:81) It is beheld as crucial to concentrate on other topics, e.g. politics: “Be sure to remain well-informed about what is going on in your own country, especially the political scene, because you are likely to be asked about it.” (ibid.) By consulting the relevant literature concerning the French business etiquette, also other publications dealing with the issue are worth noting, such as Mesnooh (1994), Johnson (1996), Cassis/Crouzet/Gourvish (1995) and Truscott/Mitchell (1998).

2.4: Business Etiquette in China

One of the most significant aspects connected with the Chinese business etiquette is according to Verstappen (2008), the so called Mianzi-face that equals a good reputation in Western countries: “Having face means you are respected by your peers. (…) In Chinese business culture, like all business cultures, a person’s career depends on his or her reputation and social standing. As a foreigner, you need not take face too seriously since Chinese do not expect foreigners to understand all the nuances of their culture (…). Simple forms of politeness will suffice to prevent serious embarrassment or cause anyone to lose face” (Verstappen, 2008:50).
As stated by Li (2003), over centuries the patriarchal Chinese society treated women as secondary to men, as creatures with no talents: “Although in recent history, many women have made significant contributions to (and even sacrificed their lives for) social change, women were almost non-existent in civil service and business until the 1950s.” (Li 2003:39) Nowadays their situation has changed: “Officially, a woman has the right to expect pay and status equal to that of a man holding the same job. It is becoming more common for women to hold executive positions in factories, companies and government offices.” (ibid. 40) Both men and women are obliged to wear conservative business clothing: “Business professional attire should be worn when interacting with the Chinese. That includes a shirt, tie, trousers and jacket for men; and for women, a suit consisting of a jacket, blouse, and skirt, or a business dress. What Westerners consider business casual attire should not be worn, because this type of dress is not common at Chinese business gatherings.” (Sabath 2002:34)

Another trait associated with Chinese business culture is to hold out both hands in the expectation of receiving a business card (Verstappen, 2008:52). Having a card printed on one side in English and on the other side in Chinese is considered as a sign of respect (ibid.). Handing no business card at all is treated as an insult that may be a reason for unsuccessful further negotiations (ibid.).

The Chinese are rather reluctant when it comes to cooperating with unknown business people – contacts are valued the most (Li, 2003:42): “The Chinese do not like to do business with strangers. They negotiate relationships rather than contracts. Attempts to establish solid connections often fail because foreigners simply don’t pay enough attention to cultivating personal foundations.” (ibid.)

Chinese business meeting etiquette consists of a certain hierarchy: “The Chinese have a strict hierarchical system and place emphasis on rank. Thus, it would be wise to select one person, usually a senior team member, to be your spokesperson for the group. The Chinese will do the same, and they may become irritated if others attempt to speak out.” (Sabath 2002:38) The Westerners should also pay attention to omitting particular phrases such as ‘It is inconvenient’, ‘I am not sure’ or ‘Maybe’ - during business meetings because they are supposed to be interpreted by Chinese people as meaning ‘No’ (ibid.).

In Chinese small talk business culture accepts conversing about one’s personal life: “Questions that Westerners consider forward and even inappropriate are considered acceptable by the Chinese. Such questions may include your salary, your material status, and the number of children you have.” (ibid, 34) There is also a variety of other topics that Chinese people find interesting, e.g. the weather, the pros and cons of one’s visit to China or other international journeys (ibid.).

The above-presented viewpoints concur with other literature sources such as: Dahles/Wels (2002), Krott/Williamsson (2003), Chee/West (2004), Brahm (2007) and Sun (2010).

3. CONCLUSIONS

What this all amounts to is that business etiquette is considered to have a critical influence on successful business negotiations. Knowing the particular rules of so-called professional politeness may enable the avoidance of cultural misunderstandings and will facilitate integration with foreign business associates. Within the scope of this investigation, the author of the paper concentrated on the business etiquette diversity of the following countries: Poland, Germany, France and China. In the above-mentioned cultures, making a good first impression is estimated as crucial: the Polish, the German and the Chinese will expect a conservative business dress code. On the other hand, the representatives of France - the fashion designer kingdom - tend to expect high-quality clothing with emphasis on a very feminine women’s business dress code. The rules concerning exchanging business cards also differ from one country into another, with some countries such as China placing more importance on the presentation of business cards than others, such as Germany. While Polish and German meetings strictly focus on a certain subject analysis and well-prepared presentations, French meetings are regarded as emotional, disordered, time-consuming and sometimes never-ending. On the other hand, the Chinese choose a senior executive as a team spokesman while the rest of the group remains quiet. The so called small talk topics before and after business meetings are worth mentioning at this point: it is common that Polish and Chinese associates may ask plenty of private questions about, for example, family, age, the number of children or even one’s own income. In Germany and France much attention is going to be paid to avoiding such themes as one’s personal life. Instead, more appropriate is conversing about current affairs connected with the political scene.

In summary it can be stated that knowledge of the business etiquette of particular nations should be
studied before a business meeting that occurs at an international level. First of all, it can help to fit oneself into an unknown foreign reality, and secondly, it can result in successful negotiations. Moreover, it will allow for further opening the door to fruitful international collaboration.

REFERENCES

JOANNA ZATOR-PELJAN, PH.D.
Poznan University College of Business
18, Niedziałkowskiego Str., Poznań, POLAND
www.pwsb.pl