



Thinking like the French

Why do the French seem so critical? There is a reason: l'esprit critique, a technique of examining and discussing ideas the French learn in school and that some expats call 'analysis paralysis'. Nathalie Kleinschmit, Senior Partner, Global'Ease, intercultural training and consulting services says you can learn it too

Michael, a sales manager in the French office of a multinational, recounts his experience with a commercial prospect: "After I laid out the benefits and attributes of our new services, I was told that these would never work. Hearing that, I left only to learn later that they were actually quite interested in what we were developing. How do you explain that? Why is it that the French seem so negative?!!!"

How many expatriates can relate to Michael? They resent having their contributions challenged or their action plans received in what seems a negative, critical way. And yet, there is an explanation to what is perceived as French negativism!

L'esprit critique

This French concept explains how attitudes foreigners may perceive as critical actually reflect a process of intelligent, logical thought.

Esprit Critique doesn't mean offering negative criticism. Instead, it means only holding true what has been verified. That is to say, using rational arguments to support or challenge an idea, by breaking down a problem and progressing from the simplest to the more complex components, by laying out the pros and cons so that all facets are taken into account before coming to a conclusion.

Most of the French you work with will have studied philosophy at school. There they learn that intelligence begins with doubt. In fact, all new ideas are approached with a question, the hypothèse.

Once the French state the hypothesis, they lay out their arguments, alternating between la thèse, that reasons that support the question and l'antithèse, reasons that challenge it.

The more they can stretch out their arguments for one or for the other, the more intelligent they are, or so French people perceive: this expansion of the scope of the question allows them to gain a better understanding of the different viewpoints and alternatives. Only once all possibilities have been exhausted will they reach a conclusion: the synthèse.

This final conclusion usually appears as the only reasonable choice given the pros and cons discussed. In almost all cases, the final decision is a much stronger one: more realistic and sustainable given the fact that it's been taken with a wider understanding of the stakes at hand.

This is already a contrast with the way many North Americans are taught to 'sell' their ideas, whereby the starting point is a conviction, the belief that they're 'right' and can prove it by listing their reasons.

Debate v débat

Consider a 'debate' in an anglo-saxon context. Whether in a parliamentary or academic context, you find yourself with two teams with opposite viewpoints. They exchange 'proofs' supporting their belief and a winner is designated.

For the French, the débat is a discussion period: a time to share ideas and expand the scope of a subject. In the context of business, it usually involves sitting around a table for a heated discussion of all of the angles of an issue.

Being right is not important at this stage and participants can add to both sides. You may be surprised to find that some people actually contradict themselves! This isn't a sign of confusion. Rather, they are

showing their 'intelligence', that is to say, their ability to think out an issue. The doubts they express aren't a sign of weakness, but cues for thoughtful discussion.

You may find the discussion overwhelming. When French managers find themselves under pressure or in an environment of uncertainty, they seem to carefully analyze every facet of a decision before taking a stand, as if to reassure themselves. Some expatriate managers jokingly describe this process as "analysis paralysis".

Working in English, or in an international environment, can contribute to the ambiguity and stress of a decision-making process. Pushing them for a decision will only add pressure and therefore extend the discussion. You'll usually find that someone will eventually round up the discussion with a simple "Bon, et alors?" (So, where does this lead us...) This is the point where hopefully everyone comes to a shared conclusion.

So, to get back to Michael: if you've spent the first part of a meeting speaking only of the strengths of a project, in a sense you have lead your opposite number to respond to you by listing all of the possible weaknesses. When you know this ahead of time, you realize that a negative response can indeed be a sign of interest and that the ensuing exchange of ideas will lead to an eventual conclusion.

How to use it

It can be frustrating to see your prospective client or colleague go back and forth when what you really want is a firm and definite 'yes'.

Don't let the process discourage you; if you're told your project won't work, make the person you're talking to work for you by asking them for more details:

What are the weaknesses that you see? How would you suggest we overcome these?

Are these really key issues? Do they cancel out the strengths of the product?

Are there other needs this project might address?

You'll be surprised at how enriching this exchange can be for you and for your project.

Better yet, integrate some "esprit critique" into your business thinking. Don't be afraid to challenge your assumptions before asserting your opinions! Present your ideas in context and so as to show they've been the subject of rational analysis and deliberate thought. The attention you pay to this will increase the value of your contributions in the eyes of your French colleagues and clients.

And, on the personal side, as you learn to join in the debate — instead of feeling yourself to surrounded by negativity and hounded by criticism — you may start to find this process creative and enriching.

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