

## THE CULTURE MAP – GERMANY AND IRELAND

*'What culture? What accent? We're just normal.'*



Navigating cultural difference can be a great challenge. Our default mechanism is to judge the world through your own cultural lens. The way we are conditioned to see the world by our own culture seems so obvious and logical. As the famous expression goes, it's as difficult for us to really see our own culture as it is for *'a fish to taste the water it swims in'*.

Becoming aware of the subtle differences in communication patterns across cultures and in what is considered normal behaviour in different cultural contexts, is very important and very useful. By developing better cross-cultural communication, we can challenge our own assumptions, unconscious biases and even negative stereotyping. We can develop curiosity and respect for cultural diversity and hopefully build better, more respectful relationships.

Hopefully (and maybe this reflects my own Irish background), we can have some fun exploring cultural differences too.

If we look at Ireland and Germany, for example, what interesting cultural differences might we find?

A German businessman described his difficulties doing business in Ireland:

*'Where I come from, everyone is direct and says what they mean and so I find someone refusing to just say what is on their mind, even if it's negative, very frustrating. In Ireland, that's normal, you're expected to figure out what everyone means based on small social signals that everyone else here learns from birth.'*

Here we might talk about differences between a 'high-context' and 'low-context' culture and suggest, from the example, that Ireland is a lot more 'high-context' than Germany.

We can think of a 'high-context' culture as similar to a long-married couple who have developed, through shared experience, a short-hand language, communicating messages without needing to say them explicitly.

It is true that in Ireland, messages are often conveyed implicitly, requiring the listener to 'read between the lines'. 'Good communication' in Ireland is layered and subtle with subtext.

In Germany, good communication tends to be more literal and direct, clear and simple with repetition if necessary. Would you agree?

Look at this other example.

*'In Ireland, she asks you if you want a cup of tea. You say no thank you. She asks if you're sure. You say of course you're sure. Well, she says, I was going to get myself some anyway, so it would be no problem. Ah, you say, well, why not, so long as it's no problem... until you both end up in the kitchen drinking tea and chatting. In America, someone asks you if you want a cup of tea, you say no and then you don't get any tea. I like the Irish way better.'* - (C.E. Murphy, Urban Shaman)

Which country, Ireland or USA, is more high-context and which is low-context? Why do you think these differences exist?

Going back to our original example of the German businessman above ('...even if it's negative...') do you think Irish people or German people tend to give more direct negative feedback?

Look at this example.

*Irish Person A: 'Did you tell him you weren't happy?'*

*Irish Person B: 'Well, I kind of made a joke of it but I was kind of making a point at the same time.'*

*Irish Person A: 'And did he listen?'*

*Irish Person B: 'I think he got my point.'*

Do you think you would 'get the point' in the example above that the person wasn't happy with you? Would this way of giving feedback be different from Germany?

Irish people are generally quite non-confrontational. If an Irish person disagrees with you, they will tend to be diplomatic. There is a saying that 'Irish people make great diplomats and terrible politicians'. What do you think this means?

Irish politicians indeed have a very good reputation of working with other country's representatives at European Union level and in the United Nations.

But why are they said to be 'terrible politicians'? What do you think could be the negative side of trying to avoid openly disagreeing with people because you don't want it to have a negative impact on personal relationships?

In Germany, would people tend to disagree openly? Would you see this as a good way to test ideas, for example?

Some other examples...

A German/Irish business meeting – what time would it start?

Starting a business meeting five or six minutes late in Ireland is basically within the realms of being 'on time' and acceptable. Some of these minutes at the start would also be used for small talk or chatting. Would this be the same in Germany? (Which way is better?)

Why do you think the attitude to time is flexible like this in Ireland?

One reason is that Ireland never had an industrial revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century as Germany did. Most people are only one generation away from the countryside or agriculture in some form or other. If you were a farmer, what difference did five minutes make to your working life? It was much more important to take those minutes to talk to and be friendly to a neighbour, someone whose help you may need at some point in the future. Makes sense, no?

There are many other cultural differences we could look at. For example, some commentators have noted that Irish humour in a business meeting may not always translate well into a German context. Would you agree?

We could also look at how Irish and Germans might have different attitudes to following the rules (we could examine Ireland's history of colonisation by England for clues to this). Irish and Germans tend to have different attitudes to planning for the future (could we blame the weather for this?) Would you think Irish or Germans tend to be more formal or informal in their working lives?

These are just some of the areas we can look at. There are many more. What is important is not that we all agree on the definitions, it's more important to start discussing them together.

Some of the benefits of being aware of these differences include increased awareness among multicultural working environments about how our way of working interacts with and differs from other cultures. We become more effective and efficient in dealing with people from diverse cultures on a day to day basis.

More fundamentally, we are better able to understand and appreciate diverse cultures around the world and build those relationships that add so much to our experience of life.