
Order, Please!

By Lothar Katz

Shanghai World Exposition 2010, German pavilion: *The wait to get inside was more than two hours. I was told there was a VIP option, though, so I gave it a try.*

A female German Cerberus was watching the VIP entrance. "What makes one a VIP?", I asked her in German. "Well, for example if you're German," she responded, smilingly. "Ok, can I get in, then?"

Given my unmistakable dialect, it was perfectly clear to her at this point that I was German. Didn't matter. "Can I see your passport?", she asked, now all business.

Problem was, I was traveling on my American passport and had left the German one back home. It took an extensive discussion and finding another identification paper that served as evidence that I was indeed German before the guard would let me in.

Your reaction to this experience might tell you something about your own culture. Please forgive my stereotyping: did your American gut say "Hey, the rules are for everybody - get in line, pal!" when reading it? Or are you, say, an Italian who just burst out in laughter about those funny Germans and their merciless insistence on rules and procedures? Overall, how 'orderly' do *you* expect things to be?

If there's one thing people all over the world can agree on, it is that Germans have a strong, some say 'excessive,' need for structure and order. Ample evidence supports this notion. And yet, did you ever watch Germans driving on the Autobahn, speeding, tailgating, headlight-flashing, out-of-the-way-pushing? Or observe German football fans at a game? How about locals lining up, or rather piling up, at a bus stop or train station platform? There's not much order to be found in any of these settings in Germany...

Everybody everywhere in the world sometimes breaks rules. It's the degree to which this is done where individuals, as well as collective cultural groups, differ.

In fact, the need for order varies within and across all cultures, depending on situation and context. Italians tend to be rather lax about crossing red traffic lights, but not about dress codes. The English, generally quite forgiving when it comes to business etiquette, nearly ostracize you for trying to jump a line at the airport. Americans tolerate a wide range of business styles, but don't ever try to do something that could be perceived as 'bad faith negotiating.'

Such contrasts are not a Western phenomenon. Examples of seemingly, at least to the outsider, inconsequential behaviors like these are found anywhere in the world. The only 'order' inherent to all this is that some rules are happily bent while others are strictly enforced.

How does culture influence which rules we follow obediently and which ones we might largely ignore?

Surprisingly, intercultural researchers don't offer much of an answer. Beyond pointing to the obvious, individual preferences, you might hear them mumbling something about

'historical influences' or 'local circumstances,' neither of which they can formulate in any systematic fashion. One of the founders of the field, Dutch professor Geert Hofstede, defined a characteristic he called 'Uncertainty Avoidance,' but it subsequently proved too fuzzy to add much value here. The only model bearing some relevance to our question comes from another Dutchman, Frans Trompenaars. In his research, he identified a cultural characteristic that is influential to the ways we make decisions:

Universalism versus Particularism

How do we weigh objective facts against the specific aspects of a situation? Trompenaars describes a spectrum along which different cultures can be placed. In this model, members of strongly **universalistic cultures** prefer to follow established rules and practices when making decisions. They dislike making exceptions, even if several facts speak in favor. As an extreme example, there's the anecdote about a German waiting for a pedestrians' light to turn green at 3am. The rule saying that you cannot cross the street if the light is red weighs more strongly here than the fact that there are no cars around whatsoever. Americans, Australians, the British, Canadians, the Dutch, Germans, Northern Europeans, and the Swiss are predominantly universalistic.

In strongly **particularistic cultures**, people usually focus on specific situations and the people involved in them when making decisions. They tend not to believe in absolute truths, therefore not trusting rules and procedures. To varying degrees, this group includes most Asian and Arab cultures, as well as France, Greece, Italy, Mexico, Russia, Spain, Turkey, all of Latin America, and many other countries.

Far from conclusively explaining why rules apply so 'unevenly' in each culture, Trompenaars' model offers great guidance to those working across cultures.

You'll want to be clear about your own personal preferences to make this meaningful. Is order important to you? If so, it won't suffice that *you* follow the rules; you'll likely expect everyone around you to follow them, too. That might make you a great leader and role model when working with universalistic cultures, but you're bound to have a much harder time elsewhere, where people might consider you finicky and impersonal. A similar challenge exists the other way around.

As always, finding out about the individual preferences of those you're working with is a great start - but don't forget to pay attention to collective ones, either.

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project and Risk Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center Instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.
