

Peter Dietlmaier in: pr magazin column, June 2017, <http://www.prmagazin.de/index.html>

The look across borders - National stereotypes

## **OPENNESS IS KEY**

The **Germans** like playing the role of senior teacher. This well-known **stereotype** is currently again coming to the fore. Its negative effect is also spreading in the corporate world. Those who wish to facilitate communication openly mention **prejudices/opinions**.

**France has voted. The Europe-friendly Emmanuel Macron is the new President.** Le Pen has been thwarted. Actually also a reason for German politics to celebrate. The election is a contribution towards political stability in Europe and the European economy. The outcome of the election was met with corresponding approval among Germans who also had a couple of suggestions ready in the midst of the European joy. That very evening, the new President heard from Undersecretary Jens Spahn in the "heute journal" news programme that France could learn from Germany's experience. Then more would happen.

Different country, different subject: a Minister of a German State travels to his neighbours. In his suitcase is an unsolicited paper from a foundation affiliated to his party. He wishes to use this to show his colleagues at State level how a problem – that exists from a German perspective but is under the exclusive jurisdiction of national Belgian politics - could be solved using a German approach.

Similar examples are also heard in discussions with other countries, to whom Germany no longer comes across as a neighbour but rather increasingly as a senior teacher. "We stand around in Europe like a weightlifter in a kindergarten – from both a demographic and an economic perspective – and are surprised when nobody gives us a lollipop", was the analysis of Spiegel Online following the poor result at the European Song Contest.

**This has not always been the case. Prior to re-unification, Germany was regarded as too reserved,** as a country that literally had to be prompted to assume leadership responsibility in line with its economic importance. It was a principle of German foreign policy to consult above all with the smaller neighbours and to get them on-side. This has changed from the perspective of many neighbours.

Now one could agree with Robert Lembke, the author of the quote "Compassion is offered as a gift, envy has to be earned". But things are not that simple. Things are much easier if one is not only respected but also considered sympathetic. And this is the problem, in particular in dealings with the smaller neighbours.

**One could put things into perspective by arguing that this is above all a political topic** that is of no relevance for the corporate world. But this is an oversimplification. Sensitivities and prejudices/opinions are not discarded at the factory gate. They have an effect on everyday life in companies and between companies. Not infrequently, such reservations can be felt only indirectly in discussions. They make understanding difficult because they are present in the room like an

elephant. The opposite number does not dare to mention them openly and we do not dare to ask related questions.

Yet openness would be a key factor. One can only tackle something, explain something, generate understanding if that something is talked about. It can be surprising for the opposite number if one places all prejudices/opinions concerning Germans on the table and makes the elephant visible. It by all means has a refreshing effect and benefits both the discussion and understanding. Because it not only makes it clear that one is thinking about oneself and one's effect. Above all, it becomes clear that one recognises the topics of the opposite number – even the subtle ones. And it is a known fact that communication starts with listening.

Peter Dietlmaier is the founder and principal partner of the Düsseldorf communication consulting company CCounselors. Prior to this, his positions included that of global head of communications at Swiss Re in Zurich and at RWE in Essen.

dietlmaier@prmagazin.de