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«Hi, how are you?» or «Grüezi»

My US friends as well as my Swiss colleagues ask me about differences between the two business cultures. Although I'm not a huge fan of generalizing cultures as each human being is different, I came up with eight aspects I observed creating misunderstandings.



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8 aspects differentiating US and Swiss business culture

- Hi, how are you?:** is a greeting ritual in the US. It doesn't imply to explain how you really are. Reply simply by: «I'm fine. Thank you.» Additionally, don't let yourself misled by a more informal interaction. As an example, to address each other by the first name, doesn't mean to be best friends.
In Switzerland, «Grüezi» which means "hello" is the magic word by which one can address everyone without falling into a pitfall.
- I love your shirt:** Small talk is an important part of the US business culture. It is a short, informal conversation for its own sake and helps to get in contact. These pleasantries usually take place at the start of the conversation. It is just a way to nicely begin the dialogue or the meeting.
Swiss tend to be taken aback by this approach as they would rather exchange some polite words on quite impersonal topics such as weather or where you come from. For them, it is often considered as being too personal too fast.
- Who's the boss?:** Look closely. Although not visible at first sight, there are hierarchies in US companies. Depending on the organization, they are sometimes stronger than in Switzerland, but hidden. At meetings, some US companies have a clear hierarchy where the employees defer to the boss. Other companies behave more collaboratively. In general, Swiss companies tend to operate on a more equal level. Employees expect to be consulted and to have a voice.

4. **Get to the point:** Keep your statements short and crisp when interacting with your US business partner. Avoid long explanations. In emails, five lines are often already too much. If you would like to catch your US business partner's attention, but feel the need to add more, split your request up on several emails – works wonders. Swiss tend to write longer emails, reasoning everything. Take the time to read them carefully to the END.
5. **Less is more:** As a Swiss, don't be alarmed if you receive emails from the US not addressing you at all. After the first or second email in the exchange, Americans may not address you with a full salutation anymore, but just start their email with the beginning of their reply. This isn't considered as being unfriendly or disrespectful, but as a sign of a more personal interaction and as a continuation of the email conversation. For Swiss, it is normal to address people in emails by "Dear Mr./Mrs" or "Dear Markus".
6. **Be flexible:** Compared to Swiss, Americans tend to be less security-oriented. This shows in a more flexible and open working style which includes altering things if circumstances changed. Risk taking and change mean progress which can only be positive. Everything new is better than the old. In contrast, Swiss tend to plan in detail and to stick to the plan once it has been decided upon it needs an earthquake to change it. Also, what has worked in the past will work again. This can lead to misunderstandings. Remember that while the Swiss find the American flexible approach frustrating, the Americans are equally frustrated by the Swiss structured approach, but: both approaches get to the same place, just through different paths. Be aware of these differences and find a solution to bridge them. Both approaches used collaboratively lead to successful projects.
7. **Time is money:** This applies to the US and Switzerland. However, Americans place great value on time but may not be as prompt as Swiss. Americans are frequently five or ten minutes late to arrive for meetings whereas Swiss tend to be there around 10 minutes before the meeting starts as punctuality is everything. Business lunches and meetings in the US are less social compared to Switzerland. Focus is set on business and less on personal exchanges. Oftentimes, there is a clear distinction between «nice to know» and «need to know».
8. **Be positive:** US-Americans tend to formulate what they're saying in a positive way such as "great job" or "awesome", so called "positive politeness". They tend to use the «Complement Sandwich» where they place the negative comments between two positive ones. For Swiss, it might sound exaggerated whereas US-Americans might perceive the Swiss communication style as too direct. Listen carefully to get the main message when talking to your US business partner. As US American just know that questioning is part of a different argumentation style not meant to be rude.

PS: THE US-American exists just as little as THE Swiss. Take this advice as hints and verify them when interacting with a Swiss or an American (actually, the above-mentioned information refers to the German speaking part of Switzerland. It would be different regarding the French, Italian or Romansh speaking parts). Cultures vary greatly in different parts of Switzerland and the US.

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